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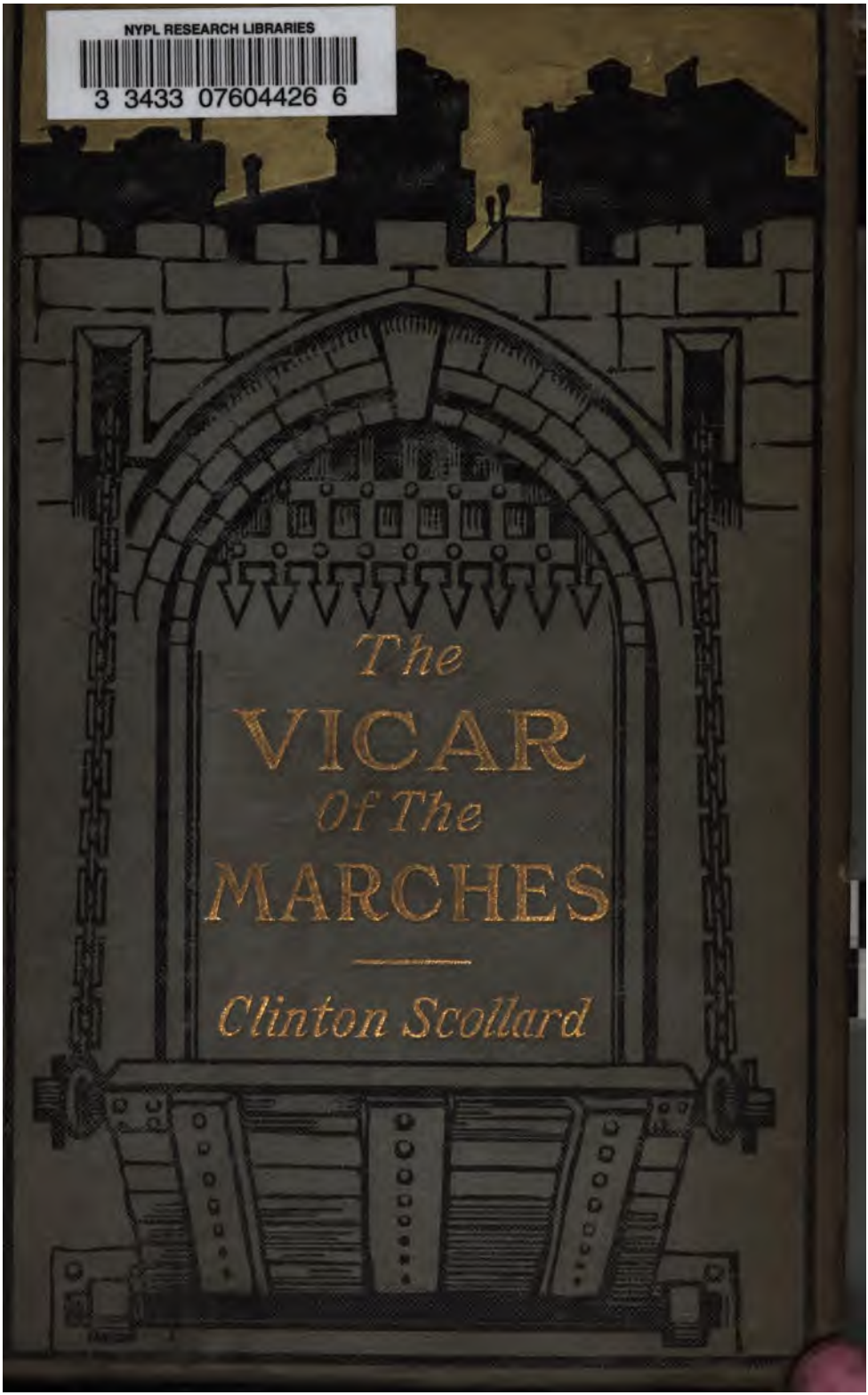

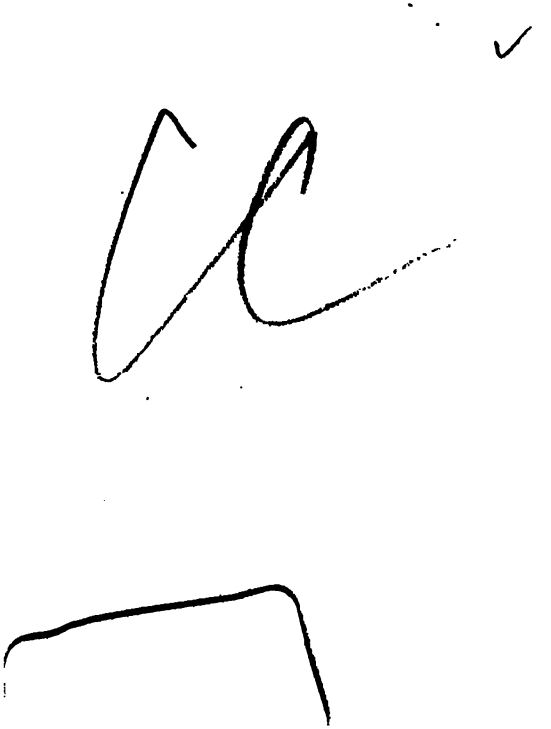

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THE VICAR OF THE MARCHES

BY
CLINTON SCOLLARD

Author of "The Cloistering of Ursula," "Voices and Visions," "Hills of Song," "The Lyric Bough," etc.

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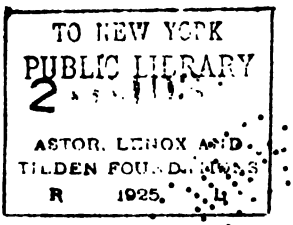

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OCT 1926
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CHAPTER I.

ENTER THE VICAR

I, Tiso di Camposanpiero, am to tell you many things, but chiefly am I to set forth how Ezzelino da Romano, well christened by some "Ezzelino the Devil," came to his undoing. The forbears of this spawn of wickedness sprang from the ragged German wastes, fought and fattened under Conrad the Salic, and suddenly grew to puffed importance through the lands which they held, by imperial favor, in the Trevisan Mark. It was in the days of the first Ezzelino, he who was nicknamed "the stammerer," that the feud between our family and the Romanesi had its beginning. Treacherous and brutal it was in its inception, and while spasmodic in its continuance, there was little likelihood of its ultimate abatement since both parties considered themselves the injured, although it was upon the Camposanpieresi that the original affront had been put.

In the autumn of that year, however, which first stands out boldly in my recollection there was, for the time being, a smiling show of peace between the two houses. On a certain late September afternoon my father, with a large number of attendants, among them being representatives of our name from Cittadella and Castelfranco, had ridden away to Padua from our castle of Fonte, having been bidden to a marriage festival at the palace

of the Caponegri; ".Ezzelino the monk," the head of the Romanesi, was in monastic seclusion, while his son whose notorious fame was later to become a terror in the ears of Christendom was supposedly engrossed in smoothing out various differences between the nobles and burghers of Verona, of which city just then he was the Podesta.

For days a wonderful dancing, shimmering amber haze had glorified the earth. I can recall that even to the eyes of a seven-year-old lad like myself, there was something magical in it. The stubble of long-garnered fields of grain, the far-stretching aisles of mulberry orchards, the indefinite reaches of vineyard, the rows of spire-like poplar trees notching the distant horizon, each and all gained through the aerial alchemy a new and dreamy beauty. I had tired of the gambols of my hound, and of playing at buffet-ball with one of my mother's maids, and had climbed alone to what was my favorite post of observation, the northeasterly watch tower of the wall which girdled the paved enclosure in the center of which our country home, the castle of Fonte, was set.

Here I was wont to watch the laborers moving to and fro in the fields, and likewise to observe the comers and goers upon the two main thoroughfares which joined the castle to the great outer world. There were stone seats running about the edge of the square room within the tower whereon my father had ordered cushions to be placed, knowing my fondness for the spot. Indeed it was

regarded in periods of tranquility not only by the family, but also by all the castle attendants, as a kind of outer play-room over which I was the sole autocrat. Here I stored my collection of bows and arrows, my slings, my two small lances which Pompeo the armorer had fashioned for me, and likewise the tough jacket of ox-hide studded with nails of brass which was the most precious of my various warlike possessions.

Having gained my beloved haunt, instead of making a fresh disposition of my belongings, as was usually my custom each time I visited the tower, I became absorbed in the efforts of a kite to capture some agile bird of the sparrow species, a fierce game of retreat and pursuit which was taking place in that saffron space of sky commanded by the large easterly-looking window. The contest was a protracted one, and I was still engaged in following it when drowsiness overtook me. The cushions offered a tempting resting haven, and with a little childish sigh of contentment, I sank back among them.

When I lost myself in sleep there was scarcely a noise to break the afternoon placidity. The men-at-arms who had not accompanied my father upon his ride to Padua were lounging upon benches on the shady side of the castle enclosure, their armor and weapons laid aside; most of the menials of both sexes were afar in the fields; my mother, my two elder brothers and my sister were in my father's train; while Benedetto, the crippled

servitor who frequently had me in charge during the absence of the family, had betaken himself to some abandoned task within the castle when I had announced my intention of seeking my tower play-room.

What a contrast presented itself upon my awakening! Below, from the great paved court-yard, the clash of weapons and the sound of mad contention rose with frightful insistency. From my cozy nest amid the cushions I bounded as though ejected by an arbalest. In three leaps I crossed the tower room, and peered from one of the oblong apertures opening upon the court. Little could I distinguish but a confused welter of men who shouted and swung their swords. Step by step, as I continued to gaze upon them, fascinated by the sanguine scene, I saw that those who wore the garb of our service were being forced back toward the inner castle entrance. This, I well remember, kindled my boyish wrath, and I began crying shame upon them, but my weak treble carried no further in that medley of blows and oaths than the empty pipings of a bird.

At the entrance to the inner court the struggle grew fiercer, and the better to mark the outcome, for a sense of fear or of curiosity in regard to the cause of the contest had not yet gripped me, I emerged from my play-room by the slit of a door leading to the narrow path along the outer wall. I had been forbidden to venture upon this path because it was but illy protected, and a drop

of fifteen feet or more sheer upon the stones of the court would have meant the shattering of my tender bones. In the stress of the moment, however, all regard for this prohibition left me, and forth I stood in full view of the combatants, reiterating my feeble exhortations.

I now for the first time noted a score of horses, just within the outer gate, in charge of four burly troopers. One of these men was keen of eye, and speedily espied me. He pointed me out with vehement gesticulation to his nearest companion to whom he relinquished the bridles which he was holding. Then he sprang with great strides toward the frantic press in the inner gate. For several moments his presence upon the edge of the mêlée, shriek and wave his arms as he might, created no diversion, but at length the spare figure of a man disengaged itself from the writhing mass which was the occasion for another agitated move on the part of the trooper. What should he do but wheel about and point with the long forefinger of his steel gauntlet to me still astare upon the wall, though this development had silenced my impatient outcries.

Astonishment for an instant held the lean swordsman, as it did me, transfixed. Then as both trooper and swordsman gave an exultant shout and made swiftly toward me and the tower, a dim notion crept into my childish brain that I was in some way connected with all the red pother.

"Tiso! Tiso mio!"

My name, called in a voice shrill with apprehension hard by, startled me completely from my daze. My glance shifted from the twain who were crossing the courtyard hot-foot to the direction whence the voice proceeded. There, a few paces distant, approaching me pantingly with a speed that seemed incredible for him, was my quasi-protector, Benedetto. He held out his hand imploringly to me as he advanced.

"Come! oh, come!" he entreated.

I now caught some of the fear written plain upon his face, and hastened to meet him.

"Who are they? What does it mean?" I demanded, as he clutched my slender fingers and half dragged me after him along the precarious pathway about five feet below the crest of the battlements.

"'Tis Ezzelino da Romano and his men!" Benedetto replied, "and methinks they seek you. The villian has broken his pledged word."

The name was enough to affright a heart far stouter than mine, although Ezzelino was then known but as an ambitious and enterprising leader. In our family, however, even to so young a member of it as myself, the cognomen stood for everything perfidious and unknightly.

"Where—where are you taking me?" I managed to gasp.

"Do you not remember that there is a passage to the castle from the watch tower just ahead? If we can gain that, and bar the door, perhaps

these ruffians can be beaten off till assistance is summoned from the fields."

I recalled the passage which Benedetto mentioned, and my ebbing courage began to flood back. Then that happened which I am never likely to forget for it was my first glimpse of naked tragedy. There was a sudden singing sound in the air above me; Benedetto gave a choking sob, released my hand spasmodically, spun round, and plunged headlong down upon the bare flags of the court. A bolt from a cross-bow, sped by I never learned what hand, had smitten him at the base of the brain, and quenched his faithful life. Uncomprehending, I halted and gazed with horrified wonder upon him where he lay in a crumpled heap beneath me.

"Benedetto! Benedetto!" I began to cry.

Then seeing that he did not move, a swift comprehension seized me that some ill had befallen him, and I could no longer look to him for aid. The sharp ring of feet upon the courtyard stones spurred me to action. Below, trooper and swordsman were drawing near, and I commenced an unequal race with them for the tower. Like a hunted rabbit I scurried into it, and down the winding stairs, hoping to gain the passage beneath where I fancied I might possibly conceal myself in some obscure nook. But in the dimness at the foot of the stairway I stumbled into the arms of the stout trooper who caught me by my doublet collar and bore me struggling and

screaming out into the sunlight. As he held me at arm's length, laughing in gruff triumph, with an exultant—"I've got the brat!"—I managed to twist my head about and set my sharp teeth deep in his wrist. He flung me from him with a great roar and curse, and had not the swordsman stepped between me where I lay upon the stones and this massive hulk of a man, I do not doubt but that the latter's mailed heel would have made a speedy end of me there and then.

The face of my captor and preserver into which I looked up when I recovered my senses, dazed by the fall, although I knew it not at the time, was that of Ezzelino da Romano!

CHAPTER II

THE VICAR AND HIS SIRE

It was strangely emotionless, the countenance into which I gazed, and though I afterward beheld it not infrequently it appeared to change but little as the years passed save for a deepening of the lines about the mouth and eyes. It was a mask, enigmatic, baffling analysis, and if long regarded likely to produce in the one studying it a shuddering sensation of disquietude. Smiles rarely hovered about the lips, and when detected they seemed to be a ghastly travesty of mirth. Dark and dull was the evenly cut hair that framed the features. The face might have been pronounced colorless had it not been for the glow in the eyes which were like rubies, lambent in every light. Of medium height, lean as a greyhound and as muscular, swift of movement as some forest creature, Ezzelino da Romano always gave the impression of unbounded physical endurance, as he did of mental penetration and subtlety.

"Enough!" he said, turning to the trooper, after gripping my arm and pulling me to my feet. "You caught him, and he's yours to care for, but you may not dull his teeth, even though they be sharp."

"You understand," he added significantly, holding the man beneath his compelling gaze.

The trooper shifted his eyes, changed his posi-

tion in dumb embarrassment, and then assented. With a swift push I was given over into his charge, while Ezzelino's voice rang out in sharp command. Twice, thrice he called, and the clangor of blows still resounding from the inner court ceased. In compact order the attacking troopers issued into the outer enclosure, our men-at-arms not offering to follow them. In the center of the retreating body I speedily found myself, half dragged and half carried. Then I was unceremoniously tossed across a saddle pommel, and a moment afterward, in front of the rough trooper into whose charge I had been given was borne out from our castle of Fonte along the dust-deep highway northward into what was to me an unknown land.

The fields flashed by in the golden light. Orchards, vineyards, squalid and cluttered villages, isolated towers, these swam across the vision, and faded in a blur of haze and dust. A warm reek of steam began rising from the horses, but they were still spurred pitilessly forward.

Once, when we had been some time upon the road, I saw the trooper before whom I sat moisten with his lips the spot upon his wrist where my teeth had inflicted a wound, and a sob which I could not choke back rose in my throat, while tears welled from my eyes. I had been much ashamed of this action of mine, and I now blurted out,—

"Oh, I'm sorry I did it!"

"You may indeed have cause to be sorry," he returned, but it did not appear from his look that he had reference to my childish fit of rage and desperation, nor do I imagine that this was in his thoughts.

Toward evening we were joined by a second company of armed horsemen, and paused a little space to bait and water the steeds, then on we swept again through an atmosphere glorified by the splendors of the setting sun. After my repentant outburst I was treated with considerate kindness by the trooper whose saddle I shared. He was a Suabian, as were most of those in Ezzelino's force, and was commonly called Great Arm by his comrades on account of the size of his muscles which were certainly developed in the most marvelous fashion. He divided with me the meagre store of food stowed away in his saddle-bags, and when I grew drowsy as night closed in upon us let me lean against him, protecting me with his arm, so that during the last few miles of our journey I was occupied with dreams and not with rude realities.

Then came a halt that jarred me awake, and indistinctly through the darkness I detected the outline of a wall and the massive tower of a gateway. There were several abrupt orders, a flash of lights through portals laboriously backward thrown, and we passed two by two into the city of Bassano where the huge castle of Ezzelino dominated from its crown of rock. The streets

were still alive with folk who shrank back, regarding us dumbly as we ascended toward the fortress. Here, there was a warmer welcome, a ruddy flare of torches, much hurrying to and fro of servants, and a loud uproar of tongues. As I stood by the side of Great Arm in the courtyard several richly-garbed people, both men and women, came and regarded me curiously. Then I was led away by the trooper along passages that seemed endless, and up stairs that wound far higher into the air than any at Fonte, to a square room where there were two cots, one huge and one small.

"These are our quarters, Poverino," announced Great Arm. "Shall you be afraid to sleep here with me?"

His glance and smile were both re-assuring. Indeed his face inspired me with a far different feeling from that which filled me at the sight of Ezzelino, who had come to stare at me intently for an instant before I had been conducted from the court.

"No," I answered, "but when am I to be allowed to go home?"

Great Arm shook his head.

"Listen!" said he, lowering his voice, and speaking in a measured and impressive tone. "If you are very quiet, say nothing unless addressed except in my presence, and keep out of sight as much as may be, perhaps it will not be very long."

It turned out to be just ten days. What might have chanced had not the trooper taken an un-

accountable liking for me, and continually maneuvered to keep me in the background, can only be surmised. Ezzelino had few schemes fermenting in his brain just then, and his wanton seizure of me at a time when there was sworn amity between himself and my father, may have been no more than the spasmodic outbreak of a nature that demanded some constant and intense diversion. On the other hand it may have been the leading stroke in some subtly conceived plan.

On the day following the irruption upon Fonte, however, news was brought in of the revolt of the Trevisans from the rule of the Romanesi, then Messer Sordello arrived with Cunizza, Ezzelino's sister, stolen away (and very willingly, it would appear) from her husband, the Count of San Bonifacio, at her brother's instigation. These two occurrences, together with Great Arm's cleverness, may have saved my life.

But thrice during my ten days' tarry in the castle of Bassano did I encounter Ezzelino, and each time it was when I had gone down for exercise in the castle court. The Lord of Romano regarded me fixedly in each instance, and then passed on, Great Arm in the meanwhile standing by as stolid as one of the pillars of the courtyard arcade. The trooper was my constant companion. Not for a single moment by day or night was he absent from my side. He had been made my cicerone, and for his own sake as well as mine he was fulfilling his orders to the letter.

Somehow the hours of my detention did not drag, for Great Arm was a famous story teller, and devised many curious sports for my amusement. One of these was a mimic battle between some toy soldiers which he very cunningly shaped from strips of red and white wood, which he contrived to smuggle up to our room. The opposing forces in these encounters belonged to the Romanesi and the Camposanpieresi, and Great Arm frequently allowed the latter to come off victorious, vastly to my satisfaction. Indeed so wholly taken up did I become with my trooper that I invited him to accompany me when I was allowed to return home, assuring him that at Fonte he should have all the pleasures and none of the disagreeable duties of the dead Benedetto.

It was perhaps a trifle beyond mid-afternoon on the tenth day of my stay in the hold of Ezzelino that Great Arm proposed we descend to the courtyard from our eyrie in the upper portion of one of the castle towers. I was glad enough of the suggested change, and capered ahead of my guardian until I had to be restrained by a word of caution. We had reached the lower floor and were proceeding toward the court along a lofty corridor when the sound of a lute was borne to our ears from without, and the voice of one singing a madrigal. Great Arm grunted and grinned in sneering disapproval at my questioning look.

"'Tis Messer Sordello," said he, "strumming lady-bird airs to my Lord's sister, the Donna Cunizza!"

Directly before us, as we emerged into the open, stood the minstrel cavalier. He was leaning against one of the arcade pillars, and was gazing upward, the while he fingered his instrument and sang at the smiling, fair-faced woman who was bending from the balcony above pelting him with roses. Neither desisted upon our appearance, and when the song and the flower throwing were over the two made merry with a give and take of amorous banter. But there was that to follow which dwarfed this scene into insignificance. In the very midst of a honeyed interchange of compliments the wooer and the woman ceased suddenly. From within came the sound of a man's hurried footfalls, from without the clang of iron hoofs upon the stones, and as Ezzelino entered, set of face and tense of limb, an extraordinary figure upon a lathered horse appeared in the gateway. As the two moved forward to meet each other Great Arm gave an exclamation of amazement.

"Who is it?" said I, tugging at his doublet.

"Hush!" returned he, "'tis my Lord's father, Ezzelino Monico."

A grim man and swart was Ezzelino the Monk as he sat his horse there in the center of the courtyard of the castle of Bassano, never offering to dismount. Sweat streamed down his furrowed face, and glistened upon his hairy hands. Protruding from his monk's brown robe glistened the mail boots of a warrior, while beneath his rope girdle showed the scabbard of a sword.

Father and son were silent for a space, eye holding eye.

"For what am I thus honored?" Ezzelino the younger at length inquired. "Something untoward must have happened to move my father from his meditations."

"Aye, truly!" returned the elder man, glancing about the courtyard whence Sordello and Donna Cunizza had contrived to disappear.

"I see the reason before me," he added, letting his gaze rest upon me.

"Why should so trifling a thing stir you so far?"

"Trifling indeed! And what, think you, has your deed of ten days' since brought about? What is already on foot while you sit here inert, planning I know not what further foolhardiness?"

"I suppose it is the Trevisan revolt that you are making this heated to-do over!"

"That were bad enough, surely, but top Treviso with Padua, and you have a combination that even the brilliant young Lord of Romano can hardly hope to cope with."

"Padua!"

"Aye, Padua! This very day the Podesta offered Guglielmo di Camposanpiero the services of two thousand men, and they will march on the morrow. Five hundred Trevisans will join them, and if they pass beyond the Brenta there will be trouble within the walls of Bassano."

"You seem to have in mind some means of

preventing the passage of the Brenta. You must know that there are now but two hundred spearsmen here available."

"One man and a child can prevent the crossing of that army,—you and the boy yonder."

"Ah, give up the cub of the Camposanpieresi!"

Ezzelino the younger who had hitherto faced his father unmoved, returning him look for look, and quick word for word, now wheeled and took a swift turn up and down. It was a bitter thing to be forced to surrender his prey, whatever his original intention had been.

"Hearken!" cried Ezzelino Monico, breaking in upon his son's musings. "I have ever thought and said you would go far if you did not overleap yourself at the outset. It was my dream once to rule in Padua. That dream you may realize if you will but wait, but you must have patience. You have taken a false step. Make what amends you can, and then, later, when the power is in your hands, you can stamp these Camposanpieresi from the face of the earth. We have wrought often at cross purposes, you and I, but the very fact that this critical juncture in your affairs has drawn me from my seclusion at Monte Venda should be proof conclusive to you that my anxiety is real, and my desire for your ultimate success is not feigned."

During the latter part of this gruff and direct speech the younger man stood with contracted brows, and eyes fixed upon the paven court.

"You are right, my father," he said at length, once more facing Ezzelino Monico, "I have not yet learned to wait. The boy shall go back, and I will not allow myself to break loose again—not until I am sure—and then—"

I could see every muscle in the man's body grow rigid, his hands clenched, and his glance swept beyond his father as though he were contemplating what he intended to wrest from the future.

"After all," said the old man upon the steed, reining his animal about, and giving his mouth a whimsical twist, "you are a son to be proud of!"

"You will tarry?" inquired Ezzelino the younger.

"And perhaps grow sorry that I ever relinquished my power here? nay!" and he shook his head.

Then he drew aside his monk's robe, showing more plainly the armor underneath.

"I did not know this morning but that I might turn warrior again, but I am glad to find that I am to be saved that necessity. Peace—" he paused as though pondering if that were the word he should use—"yes, peace be with you!"

"You mean for the present," replied his son ironically.

There was no answer to this observation, but the sudden gleam that lit the eyes of Ezzelino Monico told that his son's irony was appreciated.

In another moment he was gone, and the younger man, in no wise showing if he had been conscious of our presence, turned and disappeared within the castle corridors.

We were on horseback before the dawn of the next day, I mounted in front of Great Arm as I had come. Two hundred soberly garbed spearsmen were our escort, and the standard of Ezzelino was set on the north bank of the Brenta at the crossing of the Padua road before the outriders of the combined forces of Padua and Treviso had reached the river.

Marking the presence of Ezzelino's camp, no attempt at crossing was made until the Podesta of Padua and my father had arrived. On their approach the Lord of Romano rode to the river verge, signalling that he would have speech with them. They replied, inviting him to cross. Demanding from Great Arm that I be brought, he placed me upon his pommel and spurred into the stream which was, at this period, shallow from long drouth.

He was halted as he scrambled up the shingle beneath the opposite bank. The parley that ensued was of the briefest. I was given over into my father's arms. Ezzelino swore an oath of amity toward Padua and all its friends which amounted to no more than so much morning sea-vapor. Then abruptly reining his horse about, he re-forded the stream, and rode briskly away into the north without deigning to cast one back-

ward glance upon all the imposing array drawn up to overawe him. But his eyes had been busy, and, in the after time, many a one in Padua and Treviso regretted his presence at that scene of humiliation, for the memory of the Lord of Romano was long.

Much of the foregoing is written out of my own acute childish recollection, the rest has been supplied by Berthold, the Suabian (still sometimes called Great Arm) who not many weeks after my return to the castle of Fonte quitted the service of Ezzelino and entered that of my father, and who to-day may still be found lording it over the men-at-arms of the Camposanpieresi.

CHAPTER III

THE FUGITIVES

Between that hour of enforced renunciation on the banks of the Brenta and the time when I next came into direct contact with Ezzelino da Romano there was a lapsing of well nigh a score of years. During most of this period the ancient feud between the Romanesi and Camposanpieresi was quiescent. The Lord of Romano had made himself all-powerful in Padua and, indeed, in many another opulent town, for as Vicar of the Emperor in northern Italy he had been granted practically a free hand in such municipalities as favored the Ghibelline rule. I had grown to manhood, studied under the learned doctors of the university of Padua, escaped being forced into the church by my family only through my bitter obstinacy and the fact that I possessed a soldierly figure and a leaning toward martial accomplishments, and then, drifting eastward to gratify the itch of curiosity and a wandering spirit, had taken service among the Greeks whose empire was rent by rival native and Latin claimants, and among whom one wearing a ready blade was never long likely to lack employment.

It was during the summer of the third year after my departure from Padua, early in the very month when I quitted Constantinople to attach myself to the body-guard of the King of Nicea,

that news of the death of my two elder brothers reached me. So much my senior were both Frederico and Rolando that I was bound to them by no intimate ties of affection, but the realization of how poignantly their demise would effect my parents touched me deeply. It was more the desire to be of what comfort I might to my father and mother than the thought of my own change in state and fortune, that urged me upon my homeward way. Of course I could but feel that my position was greatly altered. From being a younger son, I had suddenly become, by an inexplicable stroke of fate, the sole male heir, in the direct line, to the name and possessions of the Camposanpieresi.

Grave responsibilities had, as it were in a night, been shifted to my shoulders. How was I to meet them?—I, whose training had been a curious combination of that of student and man-at-arms, not at all the rearing of the man of affairs, one who is to bear the burden of the management of large estates and the shaping of family and civic policy! Much I pondered both by sunlight and starlight as I journeyed westward as fast as horse and vessel could carry me.

The hot August day was upon the wane, and I was yet fully three leagues from the Porta Venezia of my native city. My steed had gone lame, having caught its hoof in a bog-hole where the roadway traversed one of the sloughs bordering the Brenta, and with every halting step of

the animal my hopes of embracing my parents that night grew less and less. My only chance lay in being able to obtain a new mount at a roadside inn, and I realized of this there was small likelihood.

Presently my horse stopped stock-still, holding up its injured member in so pitiful a fashion that compassion forced me to dismount and lead the hobbling creature forward by the bridle. Half a mile perhaps I plodded on in this wise when, at a bend in the road, I descried in a small clump of poplars what appeared to be a tavern. As I drew near, buoyed by the possibility of discovering means of further progress, I was amazed to see a press of folk, mounted and on foot, taking refreshment before the hostelry door. Men, women and children there were, and my surprise was increased as I discerned that they were of the better class of citizens, and that, a short distance in the background, heavily laden sumpter mules were tethered guarded by a considerable number of servants.

So wholly occupied with these travelers were mine host of the inn and his entire retinue that no heed whatever was paid to me, and I was compelled perforce to attend myself to the needs of my crippled steed. This duty accomplished, I crossed the flagged stable-yard, and stepped into the common-room of the tavern by the rear entrance, the door being wide flung. No attention was given to my advent by the dozen men there

quaffing from deep flagons. They were drinking in evident haste. Concern was plainly written on all their countenances; their words were few, and their voices low pitched. Not a single laugh did I hear, not a jibe, not a jest. Then as I glanced in wonder from face to face in the fading afternoon light, several struck me as familiar, and I realized that the gathering was one of Paduan nobles, two or three of them intimates of my father.

What meant this strange coming together? Why the women and children without, and the servants and the heavily laden beasts of burden? I determined if possible to ascertain.

Approaching one gentleman with whom I had formerly had a casual acquaintance, one who was wrapt in meditation slightly apart from the rest, I accosted him.

"I pray you will pardon me if I seem inquisitive," I said, "but would you be willing to tell a traveler who rides *to* Padua why so many of its first citizens ride *from* it?"

He whom I had addressed regarded me with startled gaze, drawing back a little at what I assumed struck him as presumption on my part. There was no gleam of recognition in his eyes.

"I assure you, Messer Manadusi," I continued, calling him by name, "that I intend no affront. Mine, I think, is a very excusable curiosity."

I had grown bearded and bronzed beneath many suns, and though he scanned my features narrowly

he did not recall me. His agitation increased. His color came and went. His glance shifted, and I concluded he was meditating summoning one of the other Paduan gentlemen to his side.

"Who—who are you?" he stammered.

"You knew me, a few years since, as Tiso Camposanpiero," I answered.

"Tiso Camposanpiero!" he repeated incredulously.

Then, as he continued to regard me fixedly, there was a dawning remembrance in his look.

"By Bacchus!" he exclaimed, "but you gave me a fright! I thought you were an emissary of one whom I will not name. Ho, Bandelli! Moroni! Cazaconte!" he cried, addressing the three standing nearest, "here is Guglielmo Camposanpiero's son!"

Those hailed, and then all the others, pressed about me and shook me by the hand, half deafening me with a shower of rapid questions, affording me, in the meanwhile, not the slightest clue to the meaning of their presence at that obscure tavern.

"Gentlemen!" I shouted finally, in good-natured remonstrance, "I beg that one of you will render me a reply to the question that I at the outset put to Messer Menadusi. Why ride you from Padua? Appearances would indicate," and I waved my hand to the scene outside the inn, "that you are fleeing. If this be true, what danger menaces? Has the Black Death come again? I heard no rumor of it in Venice."

"When were you last in Padua, Messer Camposanpiero?" interjected one of those to whom I had spoken.

"It is something more than three years," I returned.

"And you have heard but little news during that interval?"

"Little indeed, save the sad tidings of the death of my two brothers."

"Ah, that explains your question! You are not aware, then, of the fate of the Ottolini in Verona, of the Pilei in Vincenza, and of the Caponegri and others in Padua?"

I shook my head.

More closely around me now had gathered the band of Paduan gentlemen, their countenances betraying an apprehension, a dread, a terror which I could not fathom.

In a tense tone, low and guarded, as though the very walls might have ears, came the next query from my interlocutor.

"Said your father naught to you when he last wrote in regard to the condition of affairs in your native city?"

"Naught!" I replied. "His missive had to do only with the grievous misfortune which had befallen us."

"Did he relate no particulars?"

"But few!" I cried. "My God, to what are you leading? What are you holding back? Out with it all!"

"The Emperor's Vicar, since Frederick's death, has thrown off his mask!"—this with a sudden outburst of fury. "He is a fiend incarnate. It is he who is responsible for the blotting out of the families I have named in the leading Ghibbeline cities. And your brothers,—they met their end together the same day at your country home, Fonte. It is whispered that they were mysteriously poisoned."

I was aghast at the man's words, and gazed in speechless interrogation from one to another of those about me only to receive grave nods of confirmation.

"We urged your father and cousins to join us in our flight," said another, "Ezzelino now being absent in Vincenza, but they would not. I fear they conspire, and if that be true they are doomed as sure as the sun is setting yonder. Satan himself is in league with the Vicar, and no earthly power can prevail against him. The prisons in Padua, in Cittadella, in Monselice, are packed to the doors, and Ansedisio, the Podesta, in obedience to his demon uncle, has ordered the construction of two new dungeons."

The reason for the curious reserve in my father's letter apprising me of the demise of my brothers now grew clear. Long as he might for my presence, there were vital considerations why he should not urge my return. He could not, on the other hand, exhort me still to absent myself lest I should be exposed to some fatal danger.

He knew my nature well enough to realize that this would be the surest way of spurring me to seek Padua in hot haste.

There was now a movement toward the tavern door on the part of the fugitives. I accompanied them, walking by the side of Messer Menadusi.

"We must be getting on," he said. "We have made arrangements to tarry for the night at Dolo, and will seek Venice on the morrow. You—" He looked at me questioningly.

"I shall go forward," I announced, "as soon as may be. My horse has fallen lame, and I had hoped to obtain a change of mounts here."

"You will hardly be able to, I fear, for we were short of horses ourselves, and had bespoken every spare steed before you arrived."

He paused an instant, and then continued.

"Is your resolution fixed in this matter of seeking Padua? Why not join us and return to Venice? You could communicate with your family from there. Are you quite certain your father would approve of your thrusting your head into the very jaws of peril? I assure you that the picture which has been presented to you of the conditions through the whole of the Mark has not been overdrawn!"

"If my father does not hesitate to remain in Padua, why should I turn back?" I demanded.

"Your father is foolhardy, and I endeavored to convince him of the fact. In view of the ancient feud between the Romanesi and your family it is

a marvel that there is one of your name above the earth to-day. I pledge you, Messer Camposanpiero, that it is my belief that yonder devil in the flesh is but waiting the hour when he can enmesh you all, and then—" He closed with an expressive gesture.

"Nevertheless I must go on," I said.

"I understand," he assented, after a moment's meditation, "and I will not further argue against it. Do not, however, brand us as cowards, we who are departing. That we are not, save perhaps in so far as one man is concerned, and each of us has in some way been warned."

"Far be it from me to sit in judgment on any one!" I replied.

"I think you will one day appreciate our position," and he hastened into the outer air whither his companions had preceded him.

From the inn doorway I watched the cavalcade form and pass, the men serious, the women anxious, the children silent, the servants eager to be gone. Once they were under way, hurry swooped upon them all. Even the beasts of burden were urged into a canter, and soon a flurry of dust was the only evidence of the late presence of that panic-gripped company. Away to the right, beneath the low-growing boughs of the poplars, a streak of sunset splashed the sky with vivid color. There was a dolorous sighing among the leaves. I fancied that I could hear the drowsy Brenta lipping sadly against the reeds that lined its banks. A bat

dipped across the growing dusk and, with a shudder, and an increasing depression of spirit, I turned within, where, sinking upon a bench in one corner of the empty room, I fell to considering the parlous situation with which I was confronted.

CHAPTER IV

A WANDERER RETURNS

I shall be compelled to confess that during my absence in the East I had given little thought to the trend of affairs in my native city. Truth to tell, save in so far as they affected the family, public matters had had small interest for me. I had my own fortune to hew out. This I was plainly made to understand when I somewhat heatedly refused to enter the church wherein my chances for preferment would not have been inconsiderable. Pride rode with me on my departure. Return I would not, I told myself, until I could come as a personage of acknowledged station. I cherished no feeling of bitterness because all my relations had ambitions to see me a prelate, and never let an opportunity pass to hint at my obstinacy and the error of my ways.

I was sufficiently broad-minded to recognize their point of view. Indeed, I was free to grant that it would be eminently proper and desirable for the house of Camposanpiero to be represented among the bishops or cardinals, but that I was the one best fitted to shine among those dignitaries I was wholly unwilling to allow.

Of Ezzelino's power throughout the Mark I was well aware, but up to the time of my forth-faring he had exercised it, in the main, judiciously in Padua, although elsewhere it was well understood

that his rule was rapacious and sanguine. Of his change of policy in Padua I had had no hint in any communication which had reached me from home. In so far as I knew the truce between the Romanesi and my family had been unbroken. When the news of the death of the Emperor Frederick was noised about, it occurred to me to wonder if Ezzelino would thereby be the gainer or the loser, but beyond this conjecture did not carry me. So long as he did not play the meddlar with the immediate concerns of the Camposanpieresi I fear I was indifferent enough not to care what course he followed.

But it appeared that the Vicar's attitude had altered. If I had heard aright the man had grown to be an insatiable monster. Could it be true that my brothers had met their end through his fell agency? How long would it be, were such the case, before another terrible blow might fall? Assuredly, if my father conspired, as had been hinted, and were touched by so much as a breath of suspicion, he would at once be beyond the pale of hope.

Light-hearted as I was by nature, I was confronted by a dark dilemma upon which no buoyancy of spirit could throw a ray of sun. Indeed, it was borne in upon me, as I continued to brood in the now thick dusk of the common-room, that my sudden and unexpected advent might prove both a source of embarrassment and anxiety to my father and of peril to myself. There and

then I decided that I would act the cautious part. I would not openly, by light of day, seek my home in the Via San Michele, but would pay my first visit to my parents under the cover of night. Having counseled with them I could decide upon my future course. I was not a little altered in outward appearance, and as Messer Menadusi had not recognized me I was flattered into the belief that by pursuing the path of the wary I could veil my identity until such a time as a revelation might seem desirable.

At this juncture the landlord bustled in with a pair of tapers, apologized to me profusely for his lack of attention, and begged to be informed in what way he could serve me.

"By setting before me the best you have in your larder," said I, "and then by providing me with a bed for the night."

"There is a fine flitch of bacon hot," exclaimed he, "and those voracious travelers were considerate enough to leave a toothsome pasty."

"Excellent," I cried, realizing that an empty stomach is a poor spur for the wits. "Spread what you have before me!"

"Messere shall be served at once."

Mine host was as good as his word, bringing with the promised repast a delectable white wine of the country to which I had always been partial.

"Have you lately been within the walls of Padua?" I inquired, when I had satisfied my keenest craving, the inn-keeper having approached to ask if everything was satisfactory.

"But last week, Messere. I always go in on market day."

"Ah, then you must be somewhat familiar with the city!"

"That is true, Messere, having always lived in this portion of the Mark, and attended many a festa of San Antonio in Padua. Also I have a brother who is a town-dweller with whom I frequently exchange visits."

"A brother! Is it so?"

"Even so, Messere. It is he who keeps the Sign of the Mulberry not far from the gate in the Via Venezia."

The Sign of the Mulberry! Not only did I remember the little old slant-roofed building, but there also flashed into my mind the squat and rotund figure of a man whom I had seen in the inn doorway, the very counterpart of my present host of the tavern by the Brenta. Dame Fortune had been kind. I was now provided with a haven of refuge from which I could reconnoiter before revealing myself to my family.

"If Messere thinks of tarrying in Padua I am sure he will find my brother's inn as comfortable as any in the city, although it is small. You have but to say that you stopped with Ser Martino at the Inn of the Pilgrims to have the best that my brother's kitchen and cellar afford."

"I am infinitely obliged to you," I began, when, silhouetted against the moon-gleam of the night, a man appeared in the highroad entrance to the

common-room, and put a pause on further speech.

But an instant before my gaze had rested upon the very spot where he now stood, and I had discerned naught; yet the stranger was clearly flesh and blood and no vapory apparition. Tall, erect, supple, he strode forward evenly until he stood within a few paces of the astonished landlord and myself when he paused with a graceful salutation that included us both.

His hose was white with dust, indicating that he traveled on foot, and although his face was wholly strange and foreign I leaped at the conclusion that he might be one who, like the company that had so lately hastened away, found the atmosphere of Padua too heated for his health. But herein, as anon appeared, I was mistaken.

In an agreeable voice, speaking with the careful precision of one conversing in a language not his own, he requested entertainment from the landlord, and from me permission to share my table, a courtesy which I could but grant so civilly was the wish expressed, although I was in no mood for ordinary conversation.

Almost swarthy of countenance was this unheralded arrival out of the night, but possessing features delicate in contour. His hands were remarkably slender, yet I hazarded the guess that they had the strength of finely tempered steel. I had seen such hands among the natives of the East. Indeed the more I looked upon my mysterious table companion the more did I become con-

vinced that he belonged to some one of the nationalities in the lands which I had recently quitted, or in climes still farther removed toward the rising sun.

I addressed him casually in Greek. He replied in the same tongue with suavity.

I knew Constantinople? Yes? A wonderful city! And he launched forth into a dissertation upon it. And yet his praise was not that of a native. His enthusiasm was not pitched in so high a key. Then we fell to speaking of other great towns, and I discovered that his acquaintance with them was wide, and in some cases intimate. He exercised over me an influence that was hard to analyze. His conversation was like the play of a skillful swordsman whose point darts now here, now there, shimmering and unanticipated. I had continually a sense that he was leading up to something—what it might be was wholly beyond my power to grasp. Nor when I left him, and retired to my room, had I any idea whether he had effected his purpose. I had revealed to him that I proposed to seek Padua on the morrow, and, to my surprise, he had admitted a like intent. In so far as this was concerned, it had been give and take. Further than this,—well, I finally abandoned endeavoring to fathom so puzzling a personality. One thing, however, I had to thank him for. He changed the current of my meditations, and thus enabled me to find sleep, whereas I might otherwise have remained awake long into the night

watches brooding over my own shadowy future, and what ominous revelations might await me when I passed within the door of my home in the street of San Michele.

Plan as wisely and carefully as he may, how little a mortal knows when he seeks his couch at night concerning the outcome of his intentions for the next sun-lit hours! On retiring I had it in mind that exactly at four o'clock on the day following I would mount my steed, and seek the Sign of the Mulberry in the Via Venezia of Padua. It was, in fact, precisely one week from the day and hour anticipated that I really made a start from the Inn of the Pilgrims on the banks of the Brenta.

I never was able to decide fully the character of the insidious illness that overtook me, that gripped my throat as with a clutch of fire, nor where, nor how, I contracted the infection. For four days I writhed and tossed in its cruel rigors, ministered to with rough kindness by the landlord and one of his menials, and then the pain and rigidity of the muscles relaxed. It was, however, three more days before I regained sufficient strength to journey forward, uneasy as I was to be gone.

On the afternoon of my westward riding (it was the day of San Bartolomeo Apostolo, which is August the twenty-fourth), the sun went down the sky sanguine and sullen. The atmosphere was absolutely lifeless. My horse, despite his week's

inactivity, and his total recovery from lameness, evinced no sign of ambition, and had to be urged from a walk. The fields were burned a coppery brown. The leaves in the orchards were russet in spots as though plague-smitten.

As I approached Padua, and its towers and walls rose out of the girdling olives, they were bathed in a crimson haze. I crossed one of the branches of the Bacchiglione, and drew near the Porta Venezia. There was a strange quietude about the gateway where I could see only a few men-at-arms lounging. What had happened, I wondered, to the customary crowd of beggars and the hucksters with their booths?

Riders or footfarers, coming or going, were wholly wanting, and that grim paladin, Fear, made an assault upon the citadel of my heart, but I would not turn back. I half expected to be bidden to halt as I rode within the gate, but save for glowering looks from the German hirelings there stationed I was vouchsafed no greeting. Far up the street, beneath the arcades, I could detect a few hurrying forms. A pair of friars, with bent heads, crossed the Via Venezia and were lost in a side thoroughfare.

I halted at the Sign of the Mulberry. Its two doors were closed. In a dim passage which led to the stables I had a glimpse of one whom I took to be a hostler, and after I had thrice holloaed to him he came slinking out.

"What, in the name of heaven, has descended

upon the city?" I demanded, as I dismounted and handed him the bridle.

He looked at me an instant like a dumb person, then moved away without reply, my horse following.

I flung back the door of the common-room and entered. Alone in the uncertain light at the rear of the place sat a replica of the keeper of the Inn of the Pilgrims in the act of lifting a tankard to his lips. He gazed at me dully.

"Is this Ser Antonio?" I inquired, for his name had been given me by his brother. "I have just ridden from Ser Martino and the Inn of the Pilgrims."

The instinct of hospitality, which up to this moment had apparently been in abeyance, returned on a sudden. Down went the tankard, and the man was upon his feet.

"My poor house is at Messere's disposal," he said.

"That is all very well," I cried, in a fit of exasperation, "but before I have aught to do with your house, or what it contains, tell me what ails this wretched town! Has the fiend seized it?"

He staggered back as though some one had smitten him, and held out both his hands as though he would silence me, moistening his lips as he echoed my words in an agonized whisper,—

"The fiend!—Mother of God, hush! Do you wish to die the death of the damned? Such would be your fate if that name reached his ears, and he has spies everywhere!"

Again I grappled and wrestled in desperation with the awful Fear. That very day the ultimate stroke had fallen. I felt it in my marrow, but I would not question the panic-gripped Ser Antonio. Later, when night had closed in, I resolved that I would steal forth and determine for myself what tragedy had wrought such blight and terror.

CHAPTER V

WHAT THE WANDERER FOUND

If I ate and drank that evening it must have been after the manner of an automaton. I can well remember, however, with what care I arrayed myself, when darkness began to gather, in the contracted chamber which I had chosen high beneath the eaves. I put aside my travel-worn apparel, and donned the only other raiment it had been possible to bear with me, a suit with trunk and hose of dark blue and doublet of the same color, taking precaution to fasten beneath the last named garment a shirt of finely-wrought chain mail.

Over all I flung a long black cloak, saw that my highly-tempered Nicean blade was loose in its scabbard, perched my closely fitting cap with its single gray plume at the fitting angle, and lightly descended the stairs. I might have been a discreet gallant going to tryst with his lady-love, or a bravo sallying forth upon a desperate errand, instead of a returned wanderer about to seek his home, and fearing to find that which I had resolutely not permitted myself to picture.

Ser Antonio, sitting in the common-room with two grave-faced men who had the air of merchants, saw me passing out, half rose as though he would utter some word of caution or remonstrance, and then resumed his former position. On issuing

into the open air, I immediately discovered that there were more folk abroad than there had been on my arrival. I likewise soon realized that they were for the most part the very scum and dregs of the population. They traveled in pairs, or in groups of three or four, and a single wayfarer like myself was clearly the great exception. I encountered some of the city guards, and an occasional small body of German hirelings, and was stared at by them with a curiosity that amounted to insolence. Giving them no heed, however, avoiding the arcades wherever it was possible, and keeping to the center of the thoroughfares, I won at length, without molestation, to the two adjacent chief piazzas of the town where commonly, on fine evenings, the more pleasure-loving citizens were wont to congregate. These squares were almost absolutely empty. Lights shone in a few of the lesser wine shops, a flambeau tossed a smoky flame here and there as a warm gust swept around a dark corner, but silence held the place as completely as though midnight had long since struck from the tower of Santa Croce.

Quieting by sheer strength of will the dread thoughts that clamored in my brain, I hurried on. Every nerve in my body was tense. It seemed to me that I could not wait to compass the distance between the pavement over which I strode and the familiar home doorway in the street of San Michele.

What awaited me there? My father and mother?

—Warm kisses, loving words, tender looks,—all that for which my heart yearned,— or should I find?—

I set my teeth hard together. What was that dark object yonder near where the Via Gigantessa debouched into the Piazza of the Signori? A scaffold!

I began to run. I grew hot and cold by turns. I plunged across the Strada Maggiore.

"Halt!" cried a commanding voice.

Out from an arcade a few paces away strode two of the city guards.

"I have an appointment, Signori," I cried to them, slackening my pace as a matter of caution, "and I am late!"

Then I hastened on again, and they did not further summon me to stay, nor should I have obeyed had they done so. Afar in the east the moon had risen, but into the narrow street through which I now darted its rays did not penetrate. Later, when it had climbed the sky, its gleams would filter sparingly through some of the machicolations in the frowning roofs, but for the present neither nature nor artifice illumined the path which I was pursuing.

A turn, and I was at the upper extremity of the Via San Michele. It was a trifle less gloomy here, because the highway was broader, and lights shone in some of the windows. At the black entrance to an alley I caught the fleeting flutter of the garments of a light-o'-love or a wary fly-by-night,

but there was evidence of no other human presence.

Half-way down the Via San Michele stood the Palazzo Camposanpiero, and commonly upon such an evening as this there would have been a bright lanthorn swinging above the entrance, but now there was none. Indeed not a single palace or dwelling upon the street displayed this accustomed beacon.

I slipped my cloak from my shoulders so that my progress should not be impeded. Now I was at the juncture of the Via Santa Maria della Carmine, and now —

While I was yet a number of paces distant from my home I fancied that I could descry some dark objects upon the pavement partially blocking the thoroughfare. I had my sword out in a trice, and with the point presented ran crouching forward. Then I stopped abruptly before a chaotic mass of wreckage which, as I peered at it, I saw to be dismembered furniture, rent hangings, and shattered ornaments.

I gazed at the palace entrance. The doorway gaped like a black pit. I looked above. Such windows as I could distinguish were like eyeless sockets. And the awful silence! It caught my heart as in a vise, and every sense, every feeling, seemed for a space to leave my body.

What if I had anticipated this ruthless ruin? What if the whole city had whispered of death? What if the very walls, the very stones over which I had trod, had breathed the destruction and doom

of all I held dear? Still somewhere, in some inner sanctuary of my soul the voice of hope, no more than a faint murmur, and yet audible, had buoyed me and kept me brave. I had suffered enough before this moment, and the final agony left me numb.

At length I roused from my stupor into which I had been cast by the malignant havoc which confronted me, picked my way through the evidences of mad violence, and went gropingly up the cumbered steps and into the palace entrance. The great door had been half battered from its hinges, and sagged against the right-hand wall. My eyes becoming somewhat accustomed to the darkness, I was able to pick a path to the base of the main staircase which I unhesitatingly began to ascend. When near the top my tensely-keyed ears were attracted by a faint sound which proceeded from the blind obscurity above.

Some one was moving to and fro in one of the upper rooms. Presently there fell a flicker of light down the well of the staircase. This for a second illumined the wide upper hallway which I made out to be in the main free from the clutter of broken furniture, so I stole swiftly on tip-toe along it, and, two steps at a time, sped upward toward the third story.

Then there rose the sound of voices, low at first, but soon loud in angry dispute.

"Robbers!" thought I, "such as follow on the track of destruction and rapine! Doubtless they are quarreling over some bit of booty!"

And I was right, for when I reached the door of one of the rear chambers whence the noise of altercation proceeded there were two tattered and haggard rascals, by the gleam of a candle which had been set upon the floor thrusting furiously at each other with knives. Indeed before I had time to utter a word and bid them cease, one had received his quietus, and sank down with a gasp and a gurgled oath while the other jeered at him in triumph.

"You would play the pig, would you?" he cried. "Well, you have got the sticking which you deserve, and you'll rot—"

Just then he glanced up and saw me in the doorway. His legs began to shake; his knife fell with a clatter, and he commenced to cross himself. Finally he sank upon his knees. His companion in the interval had stiffened spasmodically and was still.

Evidently the murderer kneeling before me fancied me an avenging spirit. After a little this notion would pass, and his thwarted malicious instincts would return. While he crouched there, shaking with terror, I would force him to relate to me the day's happenings. I could wait no longer. I must hear the worst, and as well from the lips of this wretch as from those of another. When I had learned what I desired he should go, for I had no wish to play the part either of judge or avenger.

"Listen, villain,!" I said. "You are to tell me

what you know of the tragedy within these walls. And then,—well, we shall see what then."

My command was so wholly unexpected, so entirely different from what he had anticipated it would be, that he stared at me in blank amazement.

"You heard, did you not?" said I. "I have reasons for wishing to listen to your story of what has lately taken place in the Palazzo Camposanpiero."

Still he could not seem to comprehend, and his only speech consisted of a series of incoherent stammerings. Finally he blurted out,—

"I had naught to do with it, Caveliere."

"I presume not," I assured him, "but you are aware, are you not, either from personal observation or from hearsay, what occurred? I was not in Padua to-day," I explained, "and would fain be told what has been going on in this palace and in the city."

A gleam of comprehension lighted his shifty and cunning eyes.

"I will tell his Lordship all I know," he said, affecting a disgustingly humble air.

"That is better," I remarked. "Be brief and to the point."

"I was this morning, Caveliere, standing in front of the church of Santa Maria, having just finished a prayer to the saint, a supplication for aid as I have long been out of employment, when there marched through the piazza a large party

of German hirelings and quite a body of the city guards. There have been many arrests and executions of late, for certain citizens in high place have displeased the Lord of the City, and I naturally surmised that another of the nobility was about to be seized, one of lofty station, too, and likely to make a resistance, else why so great a display of force. With many others I followed in the rear of the men-at-arms until they came to a halt here before the Palazzo Camposanpiero. The German who was in command sounded a loud summons which was answered from the balcony by Messer Camposanpiero himself, demanding what was wished.

"'Your immediate surrender on the charge of conspiracy and treason against the state,' was the reply. 'You are to accompany me, with all beneath your roof, and be judged before his Lordship, Ezzelino da Romano!'

"At this Messer Camposanpiero stated that he realized that it was useless to combat such overwhelming odds, yet inasmuch as he was no traitor, but loyal in all respects to the best interests of the state, he should not submit tamely, and would not go below to unbar the door. He then withdrew. It was impossible to gain entrance into the palace until a huge beam was secured and used as a ram. Then the soldiers rushed in, dragging all the family out save one, a cousin of Messer Camposanpiero, it was said, who rather than yield cast himself from one of the upper

windows. Later in the day Messer Camposanpiero was executed in the Piazza of the Signori together with all his male relatives who could be found in the city. The prisons, it is rumored, hold the women and children. It was permitted that the people help themselves to the possessions of a traitor, and I had returned—"

"Enough!" I thundered, catching up the candle. "Now rise!" I added, menacing him with my sword, "and shoulder that!" and I pointed to the rigid body of his slain comrade.

He shrank away from the corpse with a cry of horror, but I gave him his choice between doing my bidding and starting upon the dark journey on which he had sent his companion, and finally I had him marching in front of me down the stairs bearing the dead body. As we neared the palace entrance I extinguished the taper.

"Off with you!" I cried, when we had stepped into the street.

He turned his head toward me for an instant, and I could fancy the look of malignity upon his evil face, veiled by the darkness. Then he started to run. He had not gone many paces ere, through the gloom, I beheld him cast his stark burden into the gutter, and scurry away like a rat into the engulfing night.

CHAPTER VI

IN THE PALACE OF EZZELINO

I sank down upon the lowest step of the palace entrance, leaned sidewise against the wall, and stared with unseeing eyes before me. I was the last of the Camposanpieresi. The demon of Romano had bided his time, and now that he had struck his blow was of the deadliest. Only the merest chance had saved me from the general destruction. Tears? my grief was too great for them! Life? What was there left in it for me? Vengeance, perhaps, but what could a single hand avail against the all powerful Ezzelino? Yet as I sat there in a kind of stupefaction I began telling myself that one man practically unaided had put a pause upon the heart-beats of other tyrants, why not I upon those of this one who had throttled in so bloody a fashion the freedom of Padua? Here was something to continue existing for, to strive for by night and by day.

By night!—the hours of darkness! What more fitting time for the vengeance stroke? And why wait? Why, indeed? I did not pause to reason out the mad hazard of it all, for I was sorrow-crazed. I determined that I would win my way that very evening into Ezzelino's presence, and smite him to the heart. This was all I thought of as I sprang up and started down the Via San Michele. I did not consider how I was to gain

access to the tyrant. Fate would bring it about.

The palace of the Romanesi had been erected during my boyhood in the Via San Tomasso. It was a noble building designed by a certain Messer Arturio Cantarelli from Florence whom Ezzelino lured to Padua by the promise of a large emolument,—a promise which, rumor said, had never been kept. Indeed, gossip had it, that when Messer Cantarelli pressed the Lord of Romano for payment the latter cast the venturesome architect wantonly into prison whence he barely escaped with his life.

It was toward this building, situated at some distance from the Palazzo Camposanpiero, that I now hurried, the fever of revenge consuming me. Avoiding mercenaries and city guards, pausing now in an arcade corner and now in the entrance of a gloom-shrouded passage to allow wandering bands of night-birds to go by, I soon found myself approaching the Palace of Ezzelino. Whatever the city was elsewhere, here it showed no lack of life and light. Every window of the lofty abode of the city tyrant was aflood with radiance. There was much hastening out and in of citizens clad in their best attire, while men-at-arms paraded to and fro with clatter of light mail and grating of pikes upon the stones, and with rough banter and gruff laughter.

I had paused to adjust my cloak beneath the shadow of an arcade arch, intending the moment after to mingle with those who were evidently

offering their allegiance to the imperial Vicar, when I marked several men drawing near. They were walking quietly along the arcade passageway, conversing in subdued tones. I squeezed into an adjacent niche, supposing that they would be gone shortly, but they halted within a few feet of my place of concealment, and I became unintentionally a listener to their confidences.

There were four of them, and it was clear from their dress, bearing and speech that they were gentlemen.

One separated himself from the others and glanced toward the palace.

"You had best leave me here," he said. "It is close upon the hour set for the conference, and Pelavicini will have arrived already."

At the mention of this well known noble of Cremona and Piacenza I pricked up my ears.

"Well, Da Doara," said one of the trio, "you understand our position in regard to the alliance. Stand your ground, and do not allow that wily devil of a Vicar to circumvent you!"

Da Doara! Another Cremonese leader! Apparently there was to be a meeting between Ezzelino and these noblemen that night to consider an agreement of some character between Cremona and Padua.

"Good night!" said one of the three.

"And good fortune!" said the second.

"And good courage!" said the third.

Then they departed at a smart pace, and left Da Doara alone.

As he stood there meditating, he turned his face sidewise. The sudden flare from a flambeau carried by a citizen passing through a neighboring street illumined his features, and I was impressed by their striking resemblance to my own.

Fate, the fate in which I had so implicitly trusted when I set forth from my sacked and disrupted home on my errand of vengeance, had flung this opportunity in my path. Here was a man who was expected in the palace of Ezzelino. We were remarkably alike in form and feature. Were he for an hour or more put out of the way I could take his place, and by the exercise of a little boldness gain the presence of the tyrant. So far as I could see the chances were wholly in my favor could I dispose of Da Doara. It was highly probable that the Marquis Pelavicini was the only person who would recognize me as an imposter, and I might be able to carry out my deadly intent before he could intervene or expose me.

These various considerations went through my brain like a lightning flash, and without a second's hesitation I slipped my cloak from my shoulders, cast it about the head of the Cremonese nobleman, and pulled him violently backward. So entirely was he taken by surprise that he fell heavily, his startled cry completely muffled by the folds of my garment. He seemed partially stunned, so I had no difficulty in binding and gagging him with strips of his own cloak, and

having dragged him to a convenient dark corner of the arcade, I straightened my own attire, and sallied unhesitatingly toward the abode of the Romanesi.

Hard upon the heels of two worthy burghers I passed into the semi-court or lower hall. Here I had my first glimpse of the members of the Saracen body-guard with whom Ezzelino about this time surrounded his person. Lithe and sinewy they were, swart of countenance, garbed after the far eastern mode with tunics and turbans, and armed with curved blades of watered steel.

I heard above the murmur of many voices. There was lights everywhere, on tables, in niches, in sconces, illumining the gay scene. No one would have dreamed that a fearsome tragedy had that day been enacted. When I reached the stair head, still following in the wake of the burghers with whom I had entered, I beheld, in the large banquet-hall which opened directly before me, a sort of levee in progress. At the portal to this room, and at certain intervals within, were stationed members of the Saracen body-guard, mute and statuesque. Eagerly and swiftly I advanced, searching among those strolling to and fro for the face of him on whom I had come to wreak vengeance, but I descried it not. Never had I been more calm, never more self-contained. I gave no emotion play, held every sense restrained but alert.

The inward movement of the press was for the

most part in one direction, and that toward the further end of the room where there was a group of folk standing in a semi-circle. I saw several join and several detach themselves from this gathering. Here, I thought, is the cause of my sorrow, the evil tyrant whom I seek. Not until I was hard by did I discover my error, and then it was too late to withdraw. The man around whom the crowd was congregated, offering compliment and felicitation, was Ezzelino's nephew, the Podesta, Ansedisio dei Guidotti.

At one time, toward the close of my first year of study at the University, I had seen something of this Ansedisio. Although he was considerably older than I, and left the University the year after my entrance, we chanced for a brief period to be thrown together by our mutual interest in astrology upon which lectures were being given just then by a celebrated savant from Adrianople, one of the famous family of Paleogi.

I had always spent more time at our country seat, Fonte, than at our Padua home. My special intimates had been young men of other towns, and there was no one in the city more likely to recognize me than the man to whom I must now perforce speak with flattering phrase, as appeared to be the order of the evening. Our paths had been for years widely separated, and yet despite the lapse of time and my altered appearance there were dangerous possibilities in the meeting. I knew I must put on an assured front. The

slightest hesitancy might prove my undoing, and taking for granted that he was acquainted with the fact that envoys from Cremona were in the city, and were that night to confer with Ezzelino, when my turn came I was glib in my greeting.

"Messer da Doara of Cremona offers congratulations to the Podesta of Padua," I said, extending my hand. "Although my business here is with his Lordship, the imperal Vicar, I could not pass this gathering without expressing to you my good wishes."

"You do me great honor, Caveliere," Ansedisio answered, and I noted that he was vastly pleased.

He had gained greatly in flesh since I had last encountered him, and now his heavy face brightened, he straightened his loose figure, and prepared to address his conversation wholly to me.

This was not at all what I desired. No shade of suspicion in regard to my identity had as yet entered his mind, and I had no wish to arouse any slumbering recollection by a blundering reply to a chance question.

"I am already late," I said, "and, moreover, I must not deprive these good people of an opportunity to tell you how high they hold you in their esteem."

He smiled graciously.

"I shall see you later on, I trust," he remarked. "After these duties are over—" this with a condescending hand-wave, "and such serious matters

as you have to discuss with my uncle are settled, there will be a season for lighter entertainment."

"It will be a pleasure to meet you again under those circumstances."

I started to move away, but paused an instant.

"His Lordship, the Vicar?" I questioned. "The directions which I received below led me to infer that I should find him—" my look was an interrogation.

"Yes! yes!" he said, "yonder!" and he nodded toward a closed door at the left where a grim Saracen was standing. "My secretary, Messer Carlo, will conduct you."

He spoke briefly to a young man near him, giving him instructions.

"Now if you will follow," he said.

I turned to accompany the secretary, as suggested, when I was conscious that Ansedisio was walking by my side.

"You remind me singularly of some one, of whom I know not, Messer da Doara," he remarked urbanely. "Can it be that we have met ere this?"

"I fancy not, Messere," I replied. "I cannot recall that I have ever seen you in Cremona, and to-day I am visiting Padua for the first time."

It was eye to eye now, and whatever lurking fancy was stirring at the back of his brain must have been wholly dispelled by my straightforward and confident air.

"A chance resemblance, doubtless," he said, with a suave bow, leaving me and giving his ear to

those who were eager to engage his attention.

The peril of discovery had been so imminent that when it was averted I was left in a daze. I was restored to a sense of my position and surroundings by the voice of Messer Carlo, the Podesta's secretary.

"If Messere will wait here I will inform the Lord of Romano of his arrival," he was saying, and I comprehended that I had drawn near to the door indicated by Ansedisio where the grim Saracen was standing.

I acceded to the secretary's request, and he passed within. The crucial moment had arrived, and now that the danger of being recognized was over I was as calm and as determined as before it had threatened. Befall what might after the deed was accomplished, I would rid the earth of a monster, and spare humanity from sharing the fate of those whom I had loved.

Revolving these thoughts, I awaited with my hand upon my sword-hilt the summons of the secretary.

CHAPTER VII

THE EMISSARY OF THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAINS

The moments dragged by, and Messer Carlo did not re-appear. With ears keyed to catch the first sound that should prelude the opening of the door leading to the apartment where Ezzelino and the Marquis Pelavicini were conferring, I let my eyes rove over the men congregated near me, and presently discerned one who was apparently a member of the Saracen body-guard making his way slowly toward me. In spite of the fact that his turban was so arranged as to conceal much of the upper part of his face, his features struck me as strangely familiar. Was it possible that I had encountered this man before in another garb? It seemed altogether unlikely, and yet when he halted in front of the guardian of the door, and began conversing with him in some strange tongue, I could not take my eyes from his countenance.

From the late comer's gesticulation, I judged that it was his mission to relieve from his duties the one acting as sentinel and that for some reason this individual did not choose to depart. He did yield at length, however, with an expressive shrug of his shoulders, as much as to say he washed his hands of the entire proceedings. Now, as this new guard wheeled about and stood at

attention, I had a better view of the outline of his face, and with a thrill of wonder I realized where I had seen him.

He was the man who had glided in so silently and unexpectedly that first night at the Inn of the Pilgrims on the banks of the Brenta.

I took a swift step nearer to him, and without considering what might be the result of my rash action, addressed him in Greek.

"It appears that we meet again," I said, in an undertone.

He moved his head slowly, fixed his eyes upon me, and then looked calmly away.

I smiled a little at this very evident lack of desire on his part to renew our acquaintance, and began measuring him with the thought of his being a possible bar to the carrying out of my purpose. He struck me, as had been the case when I first beheld him, as possessing tremendous latent power. That he was an ordinary Saracen guardsman seemed wholly improbable. He was a man of learning, of wide knowledge and experience, of culture,—in short a gentleman. How chanced it, then, that he was doing guard duty in the guise of an oriental there in the palace of the tyrant of Padua?

I moved back a step, and while waiting for the metalic sound of the door handle, pondered upon the strangeness of the meeting.

Click!—the barrier swung inward revealing the Podesta's secretary who flattened himself against

the wall to allow those behind him to pass. First strode an individual of commanding stature, ruggedly shaped, heavily bearded, the Marquis Pelavicini, I inferred, and then Ezzelino da Romano, dark-garbed, quick of movement, sending hither and thither his darting, sidelong glance.

My blade was half drawn when that happened which I shall never be able adequately to describe with such incredible swiftness did it take place.

Like a bolt from a bow, a suddenly acquired knife in hand, the supposed Saracen launched himself toward Ezzelino. But either he miscalculated in his reckoning, or his foot slipped upon the glazed floor of the banquet-hall as he sprang. Instead of reaching his intended victim his stroke fell short, and although he instantly recovered himself, it was too late to execute his intent for the Marquis Pelavicini interposed his huge bulk between the Lord of Romano and his assailant.

"Seize him! Seize him!" roared Ezzelino stridently.

Some one shouldered me aside before I could deliver the blow in which the false guardsman had failed. A furious clamor arose. A sea of ferocious faces confronted the foiled murderer who had set his back against the wall, his turban now cast aside, his mien that of a wild beast at bay.

Two men tried to close with him, but both received mortal wounds with such force and dread rapidity did the foiled oriental smite.

"What!" shrieked Ezzelino, now ringed about

by a score of protectors, "will you burghers of Padua allow a single villian to defy you all? Call Hassan of the guards. He shall answer for this?"

But Hassan of the guards was already at hand.

"Who is this wretch?" Ezzelino demanded, flinging a lean arm out toward his still defiant attacker.

The press parted, and Hassan, phlegmatic, low-browed, brutal, confronted the supposed guardsman who returned him glance for glance undismayed.

"His face is that of a stranger, Lordship," said the captain of the Saracen guards. "He is some one who has managed to intrude himself here, I know not how."

"Disarm him, then, and we will soon persuade him to reveal who he is," remarked Ezzelino, with sinister significance.

"You had best surrender," advised Hassan, menacing the man by the wall.

There was no answer.

The head guardsman led deftly with his point. The stroke was parried. The long knife of the stranger seemed possessed of incredible magic. Again and again Hassan renewed the attack, and with like result. Finally a second guardsman crept in, delivered a cowardly blow, and the deadly knife fell ringing to the floor. The disarmed man leaned back with folded arms.

"Who are you? Whence came you?" demanded Ezzelino, after a dozen willing hands had pinioned the prisoner.

Again there was no answer.

"You will not speak, eh?" thundered the tyrant. "You, Hassan, heat that blade of yours in the flame of the sconce yonder. Let us see if the villian will not find a tongue."

There was a portentous hush in the place. Many stole grave glances at their neighbors. Some shifted uneasily.

"Now," cried Ezzelino, "will you still keep silence? I shall not ask you again?"

There was not even a quiver of the prisoner's lip.

"The sword, Hassan!"

The Saracen handed his weapon to the infuriated Vicar. The edge of the steel showed a line of angry red.

"Hold him tight," said the tyrant, and he drew the fiery sword along the forehead of the pinioned man.

A sigh went up, but not from the one who was being tortured.

"Heat the blade again!" commanded Ezzelino. "This time," he added, addressing the sufferer, "I shall touch your eyes. Now—" this with a terrible ferocity—"will you speak? No? then haste, Hassan!"

God, but it was horrible! and there was I impotent, biting my lip until the blood ran, a cordon of citizens keeping me back from this demon. Then there crept into my brain the thought that had I, like this unfortunate wretch before me, aimed

a blow at the tyrant, and failed in my desperate endeavor, the same torture would have been mine that this unknown was now undergoing. His refusal to reply to the questions put to him by the enraged Lord of Romano undoubtedly was the of severer treatment being visited upon him than he might otherwise have experienced, yet, in any event, he had naught to anticipate save death. Certain I am, however, that these considerations would not have deterred me had I discerned the opportunity of carrying into execution that for which I had come. I believe that it was harder, in one sense, to stand supinely by, and witness such inhumanities inflicted upon another than to have borne them myself.

I was not the only one to turn aside, with look averted, when the final stroke of horror was endured by the obstinately silent prisoner. I was no stranger to sanguine scenes. What man who follows the trade of arms can be? On eastern battle fields I had gazed on death in many a shuddering form, but for this inhuman mutilation I had no stomach.

"Does not Messer da Doara enjoy the spectacle?" inquired an oily voice at my ear.

I raised my eyes, and there was the Podesta Ansedisio. I could have taken him by the throat and choked him with rare good will for the gloating pleasure I detected in his glance, for the catlike cruelty in the lift of his heavy lip. Ah, could he have penetrated the future a little, and scanned

a still more awful scene in which he himself was the central figure perhaps his tone would have lacked some of its brutal quality!

I could not trust myself to reply, and gave my shoulders a shrug which I was willing to let him interpret as he pleased.

"There are occasions," said he smoothly, "when extreme measures are a necessity."

"It may be so," I acquiesced, for I suddenly realized that I could ill afford to antagonize the Podesta.

Just here fortunately there came an interruption.

"To the dungeons with him!" Ezzelino was saying, "and to-morrow we will devise other means of making him speak."

Two of the Saracens were leading the unfortunate man away when the tyrant of Padua stayed them. Motioning back those who surrounded him, he approached the prisoner whose upper garment had been rent in the struggle revealing about his neck a thin chain of gold. Like a talon Ezzelino's hand shot out and snatched this from its resting place. As he held it up there dangled from it in view of all a talisman. This he placed in his left palm and studied it intently, showing it presently to those about him. There were low murmurs of curious comment, and during this diversion I contrived to separate myself from the Podesta and edge toward the entrance to the banquet-hall.

"What make you of this, Hassan?" I heard Ezzelino say.

The chief guardsman relegated his place at the prisoner's side to another, and stepped back at the tyrant's command. The instant his eyes fell upon the talisman he cried out something, and his face took on an expression of consternation.

"Its meaning!" demanded Ezzelino passionately. "I see you know. Speak out!"

Hassan moistened his lips, gazing with fear-filled eyes upon his master.

"He is an emissary," he said, indicating the one who had been blinded, "of the Old Man of the Mountains!"

Even the Lord of Romano quailed, he in whose heart there abode pity for no living thing.

The Old Man of the Mountains! Who among the rulers of Christendom, or heathendom, did not hold in dread that fearsome name! Far in the Syrian mountain fastnesses, secret and obscure, this mysterious potentate dwelt, sending out from his well-nigh inaccessible castle of Massiat his unscrupulous and daring agents with messages of death for those in high places against whom, for some unknown reason, his enmity had been aroused. Rashideddan Sinan, chief of the Assassins!

The emotion of the Lord of Romano was but momentary.

"You think, do you not, Hassan," he questioned, "that the Old Man of the Mountains will, in some way, learn of his emissary's fate, whatever it may be?"

"I do not doubt it, Lordship!"

"Then," exclaimed the tyrant, with terrible emphasis, "mayhap he will hesitate before dispatching another of his servants hither! Conduct your charge below!"

Those who had been witnesses to the attempted assault upon Ezzelino, and to the astounding revelation which had followed the torture of his assailant, partisans all of them of the Lord of Romano, now crowded about him with eager congratulations. My hour had not yet struck. I saw if I would escape being enmeshed in a fatal coil I must hasten to depart from that place of dreadful deeds. I did not dare make myself conspicuous by going forth alone, but mingled with the first of the outflowing tide.

I was perhaps half-way down the staircase when a voice in the banquet-hall began trumpeting,—

"Messer da Doara! Is Messer da Doara here?"

As I gained the outer air, a man, cloak-less and without head covering, jostled by me hurrying in. I had a fleeting glimpse of his anger-distorted face, and felt that I had ample cause to congratulate myself that I had not remained longer, for the individual was none other than Messer da Doara himself.

CHAPTER VIII

A FRIAR OF ORDERS GRAY

Half an hour later I was pondering upon my situation, seated on the narrow bed in my room beneath the eaves at the Sign of the Mulberry. I now knew myself to be a marked man. The appearance of Messer da Doara at Ezzelino's palace on the very instant of my exit, with the tale of the outrage upon him which he would undoubtedly relate, would set the Lord of Romano into a very pretty rage. Ansedisio's memory might be stimulated, and the truth dawn upon him. In any event it would not be safe for me to venture upon the streets again garbed as I was, for a description of my person would be communicated to every city guardsman and German hireling, and they would be keen to lay me by the heels.

It swept over me how madly foolhardy I had been, and I was seized with a spasm of caution. I got out my razor and sacrificed my beard by the light of a feeble taper flame. A shaven man! —such was not the description of me that was sure to be widely published. My heart was still full of a burning spirit of revenge, but I now realized that I must adopt a different plan. Henceforth I would reserve boldness until the moment for the consummation of my vengeance had arrived. Many were the schemes which I turned over in my mind before I slept, but I had

fixed upon nothing definite when I finally lost consciousness.

My thoughts were less chaotic when I awoke, and, crouching by the low casement, watched the hot dawn creep redly across the city roofs. I was already below when Ser Antonio began removing his shutters. To him there and then I sold my horse. Hurriedly breaking my morning fast, as soon as the first shops were open I acquired a workman's coarse garb of dull-colored stuff, packed this with my other belongings, settled my reckoning, and arrayed as I had been on my arrival, hastened from the wider and more sightly highways of the town into the quarter where dwelt the meaner classes.

Here I finally obtained clean lodgings in the house of an artisan in stone from whom, at noontide, I learned that there was a demand for unskilled labor on the church of San Antonio, a portion of which was being rapidly pushed forward toward completion. Some occupation I felt would be desirable for many reasons. To lounge about would be to arouse suspicion. Were I one of a body of workmen small heed would be given to me save by my employer. After a little, I reasoned, I could map out my course. Even then, had I but known it, fate was busy in my behalf, and when I set out that afternoon instead of leading me directly to that part of the sacred edifice where the masons and stone cutters were busy, guided me by another thoroughfare to the already

finished porch and door of the nave. Not a little to my surprise, the city having recovered from the terror of the day previous, I found quite a crowd of all grades and conditions of people thronging into the church, and made inquiry in regard to the cause of it.

The man to whom I addressed my question, a merchant of the poorer sort, regarded me with amazement.

"Have you not heard," he demanded, "of the preaching of the wandering Franciscan? Prithee, where have you been keeping yourself this last sennight?"

"I am late from the country Venice-ward," I told him, "where one does not learn all the affairs that occupy the town-dwellers."

"You should come within, then, and listen to what it behooves you to do for your soul."

He pushed ahead, and as my interview with the master stone-layer was in no wise urgent, I followed.

The main body of the nave of San Antonio had for some time been in use for holy purposes, although undecorated and illy lighted, the tall windows being filled with great strips of white cloth which allowed the outer glow to filter through but meagerly. In a purple semi-gloom a great crowd was standing in an attitude of hushed expectancy. Dimly, in the distance, I could distinguish an improvised altar and pulpit.

As I elbowed forward, lights began to prick

the obscurity where candles were being kindled. An acolyte appeared, swinging a censer, then some choir-boys, hidden by a screen, raised a chant in a clear haunting treble. Several priests commenced unctuously rolling out the Latin phrases of the service. I was in no mood for it all, and fell to wondering what possible magic there could be in a wandering friar to attract so great a throng. Then every sound died away, and a tense attention gripped the gathering.

I had managed to work my way to a spot quite near the pulpit, and I now saw a lean figure in the gray Franciscan garb ascending the steps. The face of the friar was averted until he reached the platform top when he turned it full upon the awaiting people. The countenance was one with which I was perfectly familiar, and I gaped at it in no small astonishment.

The man was the Fra Salimbene di Adami of Parma, a holy ascetic and mystic who had frequently been the guest of my father at the castle of Fonte where he had sometimes preached in the chapel. He was but little older than myself, and although our ways of life and many of our tastes were widely divergent, we had considerable in common, and I had always enjoyed conversing with him on his occasional visits. Indeed I considered him a very good friend, and I was well aware that he regarded me in the same light. A wanderer he was, as the merchant without the church had said, one with a wide experience for his years.

Previously, when I had heard Fra Salimbene speak, he had not impressed me as having power to move men deeply. He had, to be sure, a searching voice, a voice with a pleading quality which might appeal to softer natures. He had, too, an illumining art of illustration,—of dressing that in regard to which he was discoursing in fair terms, with many happy images. Now I was to learn that he possessed something more,—an inner fire that flashed forth from his deep-set eyes, that lit his thin, low-browed, almost womanish face until it seemed to wear a halo.

Since I had seen and heard him he had drunk deep at the fount of that celebrated apostle of mysticism, Giacchino da Flora, and it was of his prophecies of the coming of the Holy Ghost that he now spoke.

"*Be prepared! Put aside iniquities! Don the garment of righteousness!*"—such was the trend of his discourse.

Was it strange that at such a time, a time of tyranny, of gross inhumanity, of rancor, of suspicion, that his words found many eager listeners, for men were fain to behold a more peaceful and secure era dawn!

As he proceeded, he paused occasionally to let his eyes rest here and there upon his audience, leaning forward in the dim light as though he were anxious to discover what effect his sermon was producing. It was not until the close of his remarks that he turned his gaze upon the group

of which I was a member. Then his glance met mine, and lingered. There was that in his expression which told me I had been recognized, and I was glad, for here was an adviser and confidant, though I recognized the fact that he was one who would endeavor to dissuade me from pursuing a course of violence. Notwithstanding this I made up my mind that I would tarry and speak with him if opportunity offered.

At length he closed his exhortation, and blessed the people. While the *credo* was being sung he descended slowly from the pulpit, paused upon the last step, and smiled upon those about him. By dint of careful effort I contrived to work my way toward him. As I drew near he stepped down upon the floor of the church, and I thought he would depart without noticing me, but he lingered murmuring some kindly words to several expectant women. Then he swept a casual look at me, signed that I should follow, and moved into a clear space at the rear of the pulpit. When I reached his side, he gripped me by the arm, and without a syllable of comment, bore me rapidly along with him.

In that portion of the sacred structure which was ultimately to form the apse a temporary robing-room had been constructed, and it was thither that the friar conducted me. Paying no heed to three lay brothers who were occupying the center of the place, engaged in a religious argument, he caught up a robe of the order and threw

it about me, assisting me with nimble fingers to gird myself. This accomplished, he pulled the cowl over my head so that all my features save my mouth and chin were hidden. Then he seized upon my arm again.

"You are to come with me," he said, and this was the first word which he had spoken since our meeting.

We emerged, not upon one of the city thoroughfares, but into an open space where the stone cutters were at work. Threading our way between the rough blocks which they were chiseling, we approached the rear entrance of the sole remaining building of a row of houses which had been razed to give room for the church of San Antonio. We walked swiftly, although I saw no need for haste, and as my companion seemed not inclined to talk I also forebore from speech. I felt sure that in good time he would have plenty to say.

"This is the House of the Franciscans," the friar remarked at length, as we were entering, "the temporary abode of the order, and you are to be my guest."

We passed through the kitchens and broad low dining-hall into the main front entrance room, climbed two flights of stairs, and then I was ushered into a narrow apartment at the rear, furnished with the barest necessities for two occupants.

Here, when I had cast back my cowl, the friar embraced me with much emotion.

"*Amico mio,*" said he, his lips trembling, "I have found you through God's providence. How chanced you to venture into this devil-ridden city? Are you not aware that your name is to-day on every one's lips? If you have been abroad upon the streets it is a sheer miracle that you have not been apprehended. I think I can understand what prompted you to the hazard of last night, but surely you do not intend courting death after having once escaped so narrowly!"

"Then it is known that I was at Ezzelino's palace!" I exclaimed.

"Known!" he echoed, "aye, known to every mercenery of the tyrant, to every would-be informer within Padua's terror-infested walls!"

"I half surmised as much," I said. "Since last night I have somewhat changed my appearance."

"So I presumed, but I beg you will leave the city as soon as may be. Even in the disguise which I have provided for you it will not be safe for you to remain long. In a few days I shall myself be departing. You shall go with me. That, I think, can be managed."

I shook my head.

"There is that which calls upon me to stay!"

His eyes caught and held mine.

"You beheld, I infer, what the emissary of the Lord of the Assassins attempted and failed in?"

I nodded.

"Not in that way, believe me, will the end which all mankind would welcome be achieved. Let me hear your story, and then I shall have something to say to you."

Rapidly I related to him how I had received the news of the death of my brothers, and what had taken place since my departure from Nicea. Up to this moment it had seemed to me that all the softer human emotions were dead within me, slain by the great sorrow that had befallen me, but when I had finished, and Fra Salimbene said:

"Your mother still lives!"—tears flooded my eyes, and I wept upon the shoulder of my friend.

"Yes," he went tenderly on, "your mother lives, and is likely to come to no harm although she is in prison and will doubtless be compelled to remain there for a number of months. Your sister and her husband are safe in Modena whither they fled several weeks ago."

When my woeful passion had run its course, he went on with growing power.

"Your father and your cousins might be living still had they heeded my warnings, but they thought to triumph through craft, and the blow descended when they little dreamed of its menace. Who can blame them that they plotted? Not I, for they strove by forceful, yet not bloody means to overthrow an oppressor, one of the worst who has ever tyrannized over humanity. I mourn with you, Tiso, the irretrievable loss that has been visited upon you, but do not, I beseech you, make

in your grief and wrath the same mistake that they did who are gone! Do not offer yourself a blind sacrifice, and a useless one, upon the altar of vengeance! This is a poor hour to preach to you, a soldier, the doctrine of forgiveness. I will spare you the 'I will repay, saith the Lord!' It were a great deed, a noble deed, a deed that should earn the gratitude of thousands upon thousands of souls, the removal of this curse of mankind from his high estate. You may be a just instrument in effecting his downfall, if you will. Listen with care! I have this very day received writings which tell me that the Legate of his Holiness, the Pope, said Legate being Filippo Fontenase, Archbishop of Ravenna, is even now on his way to Ferrara to preach a crusade against the Vicar of the Marches. The Count of San Bonifacio will lend his arm and his money; the Marquis of Este will equip a troop; Venice and Bologna will swell the leaguer; and every Paduan exile will rush to enlist under the banner of the allies as soon as it is unfurled. Will you not grasp this opportunity? With the Archbishop I am well acquainted. To him I will give you a letter setting forth your eminent fitness to command. Ere you can reach him he will have heard of the fate of your house, and will welcome you with sympathy as well as enthusiasm. He will confer office upon you at once, for he has it in his power to do so. How much more noble to fight and win in open battle for a good cause, than in the dark

to strike the blow of a murderer, however deep the wrong you have suffered!"

At the outset I had been but an indifferent listener; as he proceeded, however, I was compelled to hearken by his earnestness and eloquence. Finally I was forced to acknowledge to myself how exalted was his attitude as compared with my own.

"You may write the letter," I said, rising. "When can I set forth with it?"

"I am delighted with you, my friend!" he exclaimed. "In less than two weeks' time we will depart together, as I have a pilgrimage to make as far as Rovigo, and possibly further. In the meanwhile you are to be my guest."

So a servant was dispatched for my belongings, and I became a dweller in the House of the Franciscans.

CHAPTER IX

ENTER BEAUTY IN DISTRESS

How the days dragged—like restless prisoners tugging at their chains, impatient to be free! Each afternoon I crept into the church to hear Fra Salimbene address the multitude, but further excursions, even under the cover of darkness, my good friend frowned upon. I endeavored not to chafe at this enforced inactivity, and yet try as I would my spirit grew restless. I was like a mewed falcon eager to stretch its wings. The friar saw how the long hours of waiting galled me, and exerted himself to the utmost to provide me with diversion. He gave me as much of his time as was possible, and was unfailingly entertaining and inspiring in his conversation. To such an extent did he open his heart that he allowed me to read the chronicle of our age upon which he was then at work for the edification of his niece, the Suora Agnese.

He procured for me the works of Latin writers, and we perused and discussed the makers of both prose and verse. There was a poet of our own day of whom he was particularly fond, a whimsical rhymer, Messer Patecchio of Cremona, whose latest effort, which he called "A Book of Bores," was just then being circulated. Fra Salimbene had recently tarried for a space in Cremona, and had procured a copy of this poem. When I felt

especially moody and dispirited, out he would draw Messer Patecchio, and with that rare smile of his roll out the freakish lines.

One sullen day of cloud and rain and wind on the verge of September when we had ascended from the mid-day repast, and I had sunk upon my pallet in a kind of ill-tempered stupor, it was to Messer Patecchio that he resorted to pull me out of my fit of the megrims.

"You are like our Cremona poet,—bored!" said he.

I was too heavy-humored to answer.

"If I could unfrock myself for an hour," he continued, "I would lay you a wager."

I turned a little, and looked at him.

"Yes," he went on, his eyes twinkling, "and it would concern this,—that I can reproduce in rhyme quicker than you can the gist of Messer Patecchio's argument."

He knew that once upon a time I had experimented with verses, for I had made this confession to him.

"Humph!" cried I, somewhat ungraciously, "and what, now that you have named the theme, would the amount of this said wager be if the unfrocking business could be brought about?"

"A repast more ample than the House of the Franciscans provides," smiled he.

I could but laugh in return, for of a truth we were little likely to cushion our bones with fat if we tarried long with the Paduan brethren of Saint Francis.

"I certainly will accept your proposal!" I exclaimed, now fully aroused, "if you can get around your scruples!"

He produced an ink-well, quills and parchment; then off went his robe.

"Behold me unfrocked!" he cried gaily.

Thus did he jest to keep me from gloomy thoughts. He won the wager, too, and handily, and I have by me to this hour the condensation which he made of the sentiments of Messer Patecchio. In this wise the lines run:—

A pack of sorry bores there be
  Upon the earth wide wandering; —
The pocked and flea-bit knave, pardie,
  Who vaunts himself as doth a king;
  The charletan who strives to sing
With no more voice than hath a ghost; —
  Sooth, I am bored by many a thing,
But lack of money bores me most!

The smirk and snugly coiffed ladye
  With ribband gay and eke with ring;
The jester blithe whose bonhommie
  Is but a cloak for stab or sting;
  The jongleur's endless ballading;
The soldier who does naught but boast; —
  Sooth, I am bored by many a thing,
But lack of money bores me most!

The lover sighing languorously
  In ilex alleys fresh with spring;
The dame foredone with jealousy
  That to her lord must cleave and cling;
  Myself what time I cannot bring
Keen appetite to juicy roast; —

Sooth, I am bored by many a thing,
But lack of money bores me most!

Comrades, the while I'm journeying
Along life's stern and stormy coast,
Sooth, I am bored by many a thing,
But lack of money bores me most!

There came a time, however, when even Messer Patecchio would not avail to alter my restless and reckless mood. I had been a week in the House of the Franciscans, catching only a glimpse of the sky as I saw it from the narrow windows, or snatching a look at it as I hurried across the space between the church and the abode of the friars. The day had worn on until it was near its close. We had supped, and my friend had gone out to make a promised visit, leaving me to extract what solace I might from the Annals of Tacitus. Presently I closed the book. A little breeze crept in through the back-thrown casement and whispered to me of the delights of the open country. It bore the aroma of ripened fruitage. I seemed to see the deepening glow upon the grape, the brighter flush upon the cheeks of the apple and pear, the bursting skin of the fig. The glamour of the sunset had begun faintly to streak the sky. I could not throw off, could not resist the magic of the call. To pass beyond the city walls,—that was out of the question, but go forth into the streets of the city I could and would; not into the thronged piazzas and much-frequented highways, but along certain little-trodden by-paths with which I was familiar from of old, where

one of the branches of the Bacchiglione slipped musically between ancient mossy barriers, and nightingale notes could be heard from behind the high stone palings of noble gardens.

No sooner was the resolve taken than anticipation—the thought of an hour's freedom—lent wings to my feet. Only enough of the sense of caution remained with me to cause me to draw the cowl of my robe over my head as I stepped forth into the sweet late afternoon air.

Instead of seeking the Via Santo, as the street upon which the façade of the church of San Antonio looks was already called, I struck rapidly into a narrow laneway which, after crooking thrice, debouched upon that branch of the Bacchiglione that bisects the city from a point near the Porta Saracinesca. Although the stream was low from drouth, the drowsy gurgle of the water, as it lapped the stones of the embankment which restrained it, had a singularly soothing influence upon my perturbed mind.

Reviewing, as I had already frequently done, what I had heard from the friendly friar in regard to the projected crusade against the Paduan tyrant, my thoughts leaped forward to the time when I should be able to take the field. I pictured the gathering of the forces, the enthusiasm by which I felt they would be animated, the setting out from an assigned point, the excitement and struggles of the campaign, and the final overthrow and death of him who had wrought so

much cruelty and evil. Then I fell to thinking of my mother. Fra Salimbene had made several efforts to discover in which prison she was confined and had finally succeeded not only in locating her whereabouts, but also in providing, through a warder on whose religious fear he had worked, for the amelioration of her state. We had been able to communicate with each other, and I quieted my fears for her safety by assuring myself that the hour was not far distant when the prison doors would gape.

I had entirely to myself the path which curved gently with the bending of the river branch. Although at certain periods of the day it was much used by workmen going to and from their labors on San Antonio, as the shut of daylight drew on it was totally unfrequented. I was enjoying to the full the sense of unrestraint, the soft air, the beginnings of the nightingale song in the gardens beyond the high wall which bounded one side of the path which I was following, when my quiet reveries were broken in upon by a sound that puzzled me at first, but which I at length decided to be the low sobbing of a woman.

I halted and listened. Faint and infinitely pathetic, from the garden just adjacent the manifestation of grief continued. I looked up and down and beyond the stream to get my bearings. Then I descried, rising through some poplar boughs which topped the wall by twenty feet or more, a slender tower,—the tower of the pleasure villa of the Deslemaini.

With this family, distantly allied though it was with the Camposanpieresi through my mother, we had had but little intercourse of recent years owing to the fact that the men of the house had been partisans of Ezzelino. Here, however, was a woman in trouble, hardly a servant by the accents of her grief, and although her husband or father or brothers, as the case might prove, might be unfriendly, all the soldierly spirit within me was roused by what might be the unconscious call of a soul in distress for succor.

I did not at the moment consider that I was in no position to offer aid to one in need. Weakness was appealing to strength, and I was strong. Every fibre of every muscle in my body rendered restive by the compulsory calm of the House of the Franciscans clamored for action, and before me was opportunity pleading to be embraced.

Narrowly I scanned the wall which bulked at least two feet higher than I could reach. Here was a crevice and there a projection. In lieu of wings, I developed an undreamed of agility, and a grotesque figure I must have cut, girdle-cord dangling, robe flapping, and cowl ashake, as I topped the barrier. Descrying what appeared to be the soft earth of a flower-bed, I did not lower myself from the crest of the wall but leaped, and if my appearance had been extraordinary before it was little less than fantastic now, for the air caught the skirts of my robe as I sprang, and out they bellied like the pinions of some huge

bird. As I landed my cowl flew back, and coincident with my contact with the ground I heard a stifled scream.

Recovering myself from my precipitate flight from the wall crest I beheld hard by, in the arched entrance of a laurel arbor, a maiden refinedly fair of feature, delicately and richly garbed, upon whose sweet face both grief and terror were writ, —grief for some unknown cause, terror at sight of me.

I hastened to re-assure her.

"I trust, Madonna," I said hurriedly, "that you will find pardon in your heart for my bold intrusion upon your sorrow. I was walking in meditation along the path beyond the wall, and was moved to thrust myself into your presence by the sound of your sobs. Having known trouble myself, I was impelled by a fellow-feeling to act as I did. Forgive my presumption, I beg you, and tell me if there is any manner in which I can serve you."

The color flushed into her cheeks as I proceeded. Her eyes, deep blue they were like still water under a cloudless sky, brightened. She took a step forward. Then I recalled her, Alfrieda Deslemaini, youngest child and only daughter of the family, a girl approaching maidenhood when I had left Padua, now a woman of beauty and, as she stood there confronting me, of pathetic charm.

"Holy father," she began, but I interrupted her.

"Nay!" I exclaimed, "with you there shall be no deceit. I am no friar!"

She gazed at me in questioning astonishment. A last ray of the ruddy afterglow slipped through the pleached branches, and gave to the fair gold of her hair a rich oriental tinge. She was a sight to stir a man's blood, to move him to heroic deeds.

I was no gallant, lisping madrigals and thrumming upon a lute, and I never had been. But neither was I blind to loveliness in woman though my heart had never been strongly touched by what the sentimental are pleased to term the divine passion. Indeed a soldier has little time for love, and before my martial days other matters had engrossed me. A younger son had best be giving his attention to affairs more serious than amorous philandering though there be a considerable store of gold in the family coffers.

Yes, I had never been blind to loveliness, and before me I beheld it personified.

"Who, then? what, then?—" she hesitated, scanning my garb in wonderment.

"Not even a lay brother," I interrupted. "'Tis but a disguise," I continued, indicating my apparel. "I am a hunted man, but my misfortunes have not broken my spirit, and if you will confide in me it may be that I can be of service to you, provided your sorrow be not of too personal and private a nature."

She looked at me long and searchingly, seeming to weigh me in the balance.

"You are a hunted man, you say," she cried out at length, in a poignant tone that moved me deeply. "If this be true, and I believe that it is, Messere, I know not what such an one can do for a maiden in my most lamentable case, yet I have no confidant, no adviser, no friend, and I am moved to unfold my heart to you. Will you sit with me under the screen of this arbor?" indicating the clipped laurels from beneath which she had emerged. "Here we cannot be spied upon, and for half an hour my absence from the villa yonder will not be noted."

I bowed my head in assent, and followed her to a stone seat beneath the laurels.

CHAPTER X

AN OLD CAMPAIGNER

"If you are a Paduan, Messere," she began, without preamble, "and I take it you are from what you have said,—there is, moreover, a certain familiar something about your face, —you will know my family, the Deslemaini, from hearsay, if you are not personally acquainted with any of its members."

"I formerly had the honor of being on speaking terms with your father and your brothers," said I, not thinking best, at least at that moment, to reveal my identity.

"You are aware, then," she continued, "that we have, in the past, been upon a friendly footing with the Master of Padua and the Mark. Of late, however, there have been certain differences between Ezzelino and ourselves—am I rehearsing that of which you are already cognizant, Messere?"

"Nay!" I answered. "I am but very recently returned to Padua after a long absence, and am a stranger to much that is going forward."

"These differences culminated a few days since," she proceeded, "when the Lord of the City demanded my hand in marriage."

"Your hand in marriage!" I echoed, in amazed horror, starting up and taking an agitated turn

about the arbor, rendered for a space speechless by the awfulness of the thought.

"My father refused peremptorily, without consulting me, and yesterday he, my mother and my brothers were seized and borne away to prison, while I was transported hither, my attendants dismissed, and some of Ezzelino's personal servants sent to take charge of me. I have been told, moreover, that whether I will or no the Lord of the City proposes to have the nuptials celebrated very shortly, and that my attitude in the matter will in no degree effect the fate of the other members of the family who, he affirms, have forfeited every consideration by their opposition to recent policies and their unwillingness to sanction the union of the two families."

Beneath the level monotone of her narrative, back of the even manner in which she related the dread facts,—so perfect was her control of her emotion,—I could detect a supreme grief and an unspeakable fear.

"My mother may not perish, Messere," she said, "but my father and brothers will, if they have not already met some cruel end, and should death not find me before my marriage hour, I shall certainly seek his presence then. Never, never, will I be the bride of that monster."

"The great God forbid!" said I, beneath my breath.

Almost super-earthly beautiful in her calm pallor she seemed when she made this last statement,

and could I blame her for welcoming the arms of death rather than yield herself to those of the Vicar? Nay, not I!

I mused several moments before replying, watching with a grievous tightening about my heart the suffering so plainly written upon her lovely features.

"May there not be another deliverance from your sorrowful dilemma save the dark one which you have suggested, Madonna?" said I, pitching my voice in a persuasive key.

"I have done with hope," she replied, in a tone devoid of feeling. "There is naught left for which to live. Yet to perish by—" She lifted with pathetic grace her slender hands, gazed at them an instant mournfully, then let them drop to her side. A tear stole down her cheek.

"I shall do it!" she cried, with sudden determination, "unless—"

She raised her eyes, and they met mine in questioning appeal.

Nay, after all, hope was not wholly quenched, though the flame burned low. It was mine to feed the feeble fire.

"I have a friend," I said, speaking now with swift eagerness, "who has wrought many things in Padua and elsewhere. His words of promise to me not long since lifted me out of the depths. His willingness to aid those in trouble is infinite, and his power is not small. I will go to him this very hour, and together we may be able to compass your deliverance."

Although she shook her head, as though in unbelief, I could see a delicate flush begin to steal upward toward her brow.

"What possible strength can there be," she questioned, "sufficient to cope with that which has destroyed all that I love, the evil force that now holds me in its relentless grasp?"

"My friend," I replied, "is the Fra Salimbene. You must, I think, have heard of him."

"The eloquent friar? Yes, a wonderful man, it is said, but—"

"He would bid you have faith, that is the preacher's attitude. I will ask you to have hope, that is the soldier's word. May I come to you again tomorrow at this hour?"

"Yes, you may come; it is the one time of the day that I am left to myself," she answered unhesitatingly. "How good you are to me, Messere! How good you are to me, a stranger! Though I know you not, you have my complete confidence, and although naught should result from your endeavors, and I should step out into the darkness, in my last prayers I shall remember you."

"Courage!" cried I, possessing myself of one of her hands, "courage!" and with that I would have taken my departure.

"If—if the worst should happen," said she, detaining me, "and I should never speak with you again, may I not take with me the name of the one who has been so knightly—so generous?"

"Though I must hide my name from others," I answered, "I have no reason to conceal it from you. I am Tiso Camposanpiero."

Now I had both her hands in mine.

"Oh, I remember you now!" she cried, and she glanced about in quick apprehension. "Ah, I understand it all! And we are kinsfolk, are we not, if not nearly related? And we are to be friends, are we not, though our fathers did not view matters alike, is it not so, Messer Camposanpiero?"

"I hope to give you further proof of my friendship, Madonna Alfrieda."

"God is indeed kind, and only an hour since I thought He and all the saints had deserted me. Yes, I will be courageous. But you will make haste in whatever you do, will you not, for I cannot say what day will bring news of that of which I live in terror!"

Her whole demeanor had changed. It was not in vain that I had fed the fires of hope.

"At this hour to-morrow, then," I said, preparing to depart, "I will give three sharp taps upon the garden wall without. Do you answer from within."

"I will! I will!" she cried, "and God speed you in your efforts."

In another moment I was hurrying back to the House of the Franciscans along the path by the river branch. What would Fra Salimbene have to say in regard to that to which I had committed myself? Demur he might at first, but I was confident that in the end I should win him over. Refuse to lend aid to so noble and sweet a maid in such a dire predicament? Not he!

Indeed I was sure, if need be, he would hasten the hour of his leaving Padua, whatever the demands upon him, if by so doing he could deliver Madonna Alfrieda from Ezzelino's toils.

Dusk swooped swiftly upon the city. There being no one in sight, I gathered up the skirts of my robe, and scurried in most unfriar-like fashion along the winding laneway toward my haven of refuge. As I approached it, there was a forking of the passage, and it struck me that there could be no possible harm, the light being so dim, in following the shorter route which led across the Via Santo and past the more completed side of the church of San Antonio.

I had crossed the street, and was making for the corner of the sacred structure when there came limping toward me full in the course which I was pursuing the great hulking figure of a man. As I changed my direction slightly to avoid him, a familiar something in his mien arrested my attention. His hat was slouched over a face grizzled with a beard of many days' growth. His accoutrement, nondescript in its make-up, save that he trailed a sword, was shabby in the extreme, and I believe I should have let him go by unsaluted in spite of the indefinable something about him that had taken my eye, had he not, when we were abreast, raised his head a trifle and shot a sidelong look at me.

Could I be mistaken? Impossible! It was certainly Berthold the Suabian, the Great Arm of my

boyhood's adventure at Fonte and in the castle of Ezzelino at Bassano, he who had left the Vicar and taken service with my father. He it was who had been my mentor in all martial matters, who had ever been deeply attached to me, who had vainly pleaded with gruff persistence to be allowed to accompany me when I had set out to seek my fortune in the East.

I halted abruptly. There were other wayfarers, so I needs must speak softly.

"Berthold!" said I.

He paused and wheeled about with amazing suddenness, drew himself erect, and took a step toward me.

"What friar are you," he demanded, dropping his voice to a level with mine, "who calls me Berthold?"

I gave a little laugh which he must have fancied he recognized, for he sidled nearer, caught me by the arm and peered under my cowl.

"By God!" he exclaimed beneath his breath, "but it's Messer Tiso!"

"It's none other, Berthold!" said I.

He gave a great sigh of joy, for this man loved me.

"I have lingered in this accursed town in the blind hope of seeing you, if you returned, and being of some use, and here you are! We must talk. I will lead, and do you stray after, but not too closely. No one will remark your friar's gown in the place to which I shall conduct you."

And so I turned my back on the church of San Antonio and the House of the Franciscans, for between Berthold and myself there was much to be said.

It was to a wine-shop frequented by the baser sort, cut-purses and throat-slitters and alley-thieves, that Berthold guided me by many devious windings. When our destination was reached it proved to be quite as he had averred, no one paid the slightest heed to my friar's garb, and we secured a little table in one corner of the illy lit cellar-room where we could converse wholly as we willed.

The drawer, than whom I have never beheld a more miserable specimen of humanity, served us with a wine whose quality was vastly above our surroundings, and over our brimming tankards we exchanged confidences.

"If it please you, Messer Tiso," Berthold said, when we had pledged each other as friends and not as master and servitor, "I should like to hear your tale first."

And so I gave him his wish, omitting nothing, not even my interview with, and promise to, Alfrieda Deslemaini.

"We are well encountered," he said, when I had concluded, "for I think I can be of service, and you cannot now refuse to let me accompany you as you did three years ago."

"That, as you know, was only because I was aware that my father needed you," said I.

"Of precious little avail was I at the last!"

he exclaimed sadly, "after your father had left Fonte, and put his head into the mouth of the monster here in Padua! What could a dozen stout arms do against hundreds? I am alive only because I had friends among the Germans who came to force your father's surrender. They refused to cut me down, and turned me loose into the streets which I have since haunted on the chance of meeting you, for I supposed sooner or later you would appear, just as you have done. I am a trifle lame from a wound received at the palace, but my arm is sound, Messer Tiso, and my heart, —but of that I will not speak. You can command me, indeed you *must* command me for you are the head of the Camposanpieresi, and I will not alter my allegiance."

"So I cannot get rid of you, even should I wish to, that is the idea, is it?" said I, with a grave smile.

"Put it as you will," he answered, with a shrug of his great shoulders.

Presently we quitted the place, and trudged side by side through the darkness to the door of the House of the Franciscans.

"I shall look for you to-morrow at the same place where we met to-day, and at the same hour," I said, as we parted.

"It is well," he replied. "I shall be there."

Then I mounted the stairs to the room where I knew Fra Salimbene was awaiting me.

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CHAPTER XI

THE TWO BROTHERS OF MONSELICE

There was a wry expression of disapproval on the friar's kindly face when I entered the apartment which we shared. Glancing up from his breviary, he shook his head half sorrowfully, half indignantly.

"Why must you take the risk?" he demanded. "I have been upon the very coals of anxiety, suffering martyrdom."

"I am aware that I owe you apologies," said I, "many of them. Will you accept them, and then hearken? Much has happened."

He nodded, only half appeased.

"It may have been folly at the outset," I acknowledged, "but the call of the sky and the open air was imperative, and, as it has resulted, I think you will admit that it is fortunate I gave heed."

"Well," he cried impatiently, "I am listening."

Beneath his abrupt utterance I noted that his good humor was restored, and so proceeded to the relation of my evening's adventures. When I had concluded he was gazing at me fixedly.

"I was wrong," he declared at length, "to show my displeasure. The spirit of some saint moved you in your outgoing, and guided your footsteps."

Then he fell to calculating.

"Yes," he continued presently, "it can and shall be done. Though I am persuaded that my labors here are of some value, I will terminate them to-morrow. It will be worth more to save that innocent maiden from death, or a life worse than death, than anything I can accomplish from the pulpit of San Antonio. There are Deslemaini in Ferrara, as mayhap you know. We can take her to them, or in case they do not wish to receive her, to my niece, Suora Agnese, at the convent of Santa Lucia."

"You have planned it all without my urgence," I cried. "You are a friend indeed!"

"You are to see her to-morrow evening?" he went on.

"Yes."

"Bid her, then, be ready as early as possible on the evening following. A nun's garb will be her best disguise, and I can without difficulty procure one for her. I will supply her, too, with a capable woman attendant, a worthy creature that I wot of. There will be no time to waste, and we must have everything in readiness. You had best bring your man-at-arms hither with you, and we will confer in regard to the horses. He can manage that matter better than I can, and moreover, perhaps suggest a rendezvous."

"There was formerly an inn called The Traveler's Rest just without the Porta di Santa Croce. I used sometimes to pause there for a stoup of wine in my student days when I rode forth hawking."

"The very place, if the tavern still stands, and the landlord be not a rogue."

"We shall have to trust Berthold to deal with him, and he has a very pretty faculty for managing such folk."

There was more talk of a like nature before we sought our pallets, and then for me there was little slumber, although the friar was soon filling the narrow room with the doubtful music of his snores.

It seemed to me that the hours of the following day would never pass. Again and yet again did I revert to, and rehearse mentally, my interview with Alfrieda Deslemaini. Was she marking off with eagerness akin to mine, I pondered, the moments to elapse before the close of day? What beauty was hers, what sweetness, what solemn determination! With what complete trust had she placed her hands in mine! Could it be that the Divine Will that had scourged our spirits so sorely had for us in the dim and distant future some alleviating compensation? The thought, like a flash of celestial light, leaped suddenly into my brain. Was it wrong to harbor it? Nay, why should it be? Sorrow had drawn, was drawing us, together. Might not out of grief and suffering blossom the fair and fragrant flower of love? There had been in my life little of tenderness, youngest born though I had been. I had not been, however, a child that craved coddling and caresses. Sentiment in me had lain dormant, but I realized

that my recent experiences had awakened in me a great yearning for human sympathy and affection.

That afternoon I heard Fra Salimbene deliver what was to be, for a time, his last exhortation to the Paduans. His eloquence mounted to heights before unapproached. Waves of unpent emotion swept through the worshipping throng. I alone of all the listeners could understand the unrestrained exaltation and appeal of his benediction. The services had been more protracted than common, and when I emerged from San Antonio not more than a double score of minutes were lacking ere my meeting hour with Madonna Alfrieda in the garden of Villa Deslemaini.

"Why," I asked myself, "should I return to mope and fret in the House of the Franciscans?"

I would stay in the streets, and stroll in unfrequented quarters. Surely a meditative friar was a common figure! There was no reason for my attracting attention nor arousing comment. I was moved from my purpose of seeking little traveled ways, however, by encountering a young Dominican friar just as I was about to separate myself from the multitude in the Via Santo. We had walked a few paces abreast when he addressed me

"I heard it whispered this morning," he said, "that there would be a pronouncement of judgment just before sundown in the Piazza Torricelle. Did such a rumor reach your ears?"

"Nay," I returned, "I am ignorant of any

such proposed official function. Will the Podesta preside? And why the publicity?"

He drew closer to me, and lowered his voice.

"As I had it," he averred, "the city's master will be there in person, and the reason for this is a wish further to overawe the people. You are aware what extreme measures have been taken of late to fix more firmly the Vicar's rule? It is now bruited abroad that the Deslemaini have been executed in prison."

Alfreida's fears, then, in regard to the fate of her father and brothers were proving but too well founded. All the burning lust for vengeance which I had put down in my heart under the softening influence of Fra Salimbene leaped up again on the instant. I began to shiver, and felt my fingers twitching beneath the sleeves of my robe.

"If your way lies in the direction of the Piazza Torricelle," said I, "with your permission I will accompany you."

What inspired me to this proposal I cannot say, unless it was the murderous impulse of the night of my arrival for the moment mastering me again. In any event, the words were hardly more than spoken ere I regretted them, for the young Dominican immediately embraced my suggestion of companionship.

"Yes," he said, "I am bound thither out of curiosity, and would have you as a comrade most gladly. I am not of Padua, and would fain learn how galling a yoke this poor city will yet endure before is rises and crushes its tormentor."

These were bold words to be uttered on a public highway, and my suprised look was not lost on the young friar.

"No, I have no apprehension," he remarked, as though I had commented on his temerity. "Messer Ezzelino knows where to stop. He will not assail the church, at least in the person of its humble members like ourselves. He is very sensible of the hostile attitude of Rome, although he may make a great pretense of indifference."

I was not conversant with the affairs of state into which my companion seemed inclined to plunge, and consequently was silent.

Little swirls and eddies of folk from side lanes and passages were constantly joining the main stream with which we were being swept on, and when we gained the entrance to the piazza we were but two buffeted atoms in a swaying and jostling press.

"See!" exclaimed the young Dominican, clutching my arm, and pointing, "yonder are some steps which are unoccupied! They will afford us an excellent view of whatever is to take place."

By dint of strenuous pushing—my companion's shoulders were as broad as mine—we succeeded in clearing an opening to the spot indicated where we established ourselves. Though we were speedily hemmed in by others, we had possessed ourselves of the most desirable vantage point, and were likely to miss nothing of the anticipated spectacle.

It is not a large square, the Piazza Torricelle,

long rather than broad, and almost directly opposite where we were standing a platform for the city dignitaries had been erected. A dense mass of humanity packed the intervening space above whose heads we now gazed, marking a backward ripple that swelled to a wave where a party of the city guardsmen were clearing a path for those who trod in their wake. Finally, in the rear, marched a company of German mercenaires.

Ezzelino da Romano was the first to mount the platform, Ansedisio, the Podesta, hard at his heels. Then followed a group of the city guards conducting those upon whom judgment was to be pronounced, six men, all of them in chains. The hirelings spread themselves below, and began forcing back the citizens from immediate proximity to the raised structure whereat sullen murmurs were lifted here and there, spasmodic and yet ominous.

On a small dais, covered with a suggestively red fabric, Ezzelino and the Podesta were seated. A herald announced the names of those who were manacled, and the offence each had committed. Then, one by one, they were bidden to stand forth and receive sentence.

First was summoned a noble Veronese whose crime was conspiracy. He was condemned to the scaffold, Ezzelino himself announcing the captive's fate in his high, penetrating voice which cleft like a piercing instrument note through the hush. Next a rich burgher of Vincenza was commanded

to step forward. He was accused of eluding his just share of a war-tax, and was told that torture was in store for him.

Then two brothers of Monselice were called to face their judge. Their fault, it appeared, was that of uttering treasonous language.

"Monte and Arnaldo da Monselice!" thus the herald nominated them, and they appeared, one standing, as commanded, a few paces in the background. Powerful men they were, he who stepped to the fore wearing his shackles as though they were as light as ornaments. Both held their heads high, gazing straight at their persecutor and judge.

"Traitors! Traitors!" cried Ezzelino, springing to his feet, his tone rising to the pitch of frenzy. "Traitors should not have tongues! They shall be torn out!"

"Lordship," we could hear one of the brothers protest, "we have been faithful to you always. We have been basely slandered. We are innocent!"

"Innocent!" echoed the Vicar, with his mirthless laugh, "as innocent as babes, I suppose. Well, you shall prattle no more!"

At this cruel taunt, Monte, the more massive of the brothers, sprang at the tyrant raging above him. Out went his huge manacled arms, and beneath their force Ezzelino, stationed although he was considerably higher than his assailant, was felled to the floor of the dais. Struggling and screaming for aid, the Lord of Padua managed

to thrust off his handicapped attacker, and partially regained his feet only to be beaten down again by the infuriated man from Monselice who belabored him with his chains, tore, like a wild animal, at the tyrant's throat with his teeth, dug at his vitals with his elbows, and only desisted when he had been hacked and hewed out of all mortal semblance by the swords of the city guards. Arnaldo, in striving to assist his brother, shared his ghastly fate.

For a moment the platform was a mad chaos of whirling arms, twisting legs and swinging swords, a writhing mass whence issued shrieks, curses, and fierce inarticulate cries. Then at the very instant when I was glorying in the monster's tragic death out of the gory tangle he emerged, supported by Ansedisio, his clothing half rent from his body, his countenance disfigured and distorted, yet with a baleful fire still burning in his eyes which told that his evil star had not yet been quenched.

While shouts and cheers and groans went up from the seething multitude, I contrived to slip from my post of observation, and sped away toward the villa garden of the Deslamaini.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE GARDEN OF THE VILLA DESLEMAINI

It was at no mean pace that I fled from the Piazza Torrecelle, yet by some unaccountable magic the news of the violent attempt upon the life of Ezzelino had outfooted me, and no attention was paid to my undignified haste. If any one gave me a thought it was doubtless to conjecture that I was hurrying to the side of some dying wretch to grant him absolution. Toward the square which I had quitted a surging flood was setting, and to escape its billows I was forced to make a detour and approach the Villa Deslemaini from a direction opposite to that by which I had reached it the previous evening. This led me past the villa entrance, a high iron gateway which was closely barred. The windows of the pleasure-house were tightly shuttered, and apprehension seized me lest during the hours which had elapsed since our meeting Madonna Alfrieda had been removed to another place of confinement.

With no little anxiety I sounded the signal agreed upon, and a thrill of happiness shot through my breast when it was speedily answered. With a hasty glance up and down the path to make sure that I was unobserved, I mounted the wall, as I had done before, and dropped into the garden.

There was Madonna Alfrieda, flushed and eager, and we lost no time in seeking the kindly concealment of the laurel arbor.

"You have good tidings for me, kinsman Tiso!" she exclaimed, "I can read the fact upon your face."

Good tidings I had indeed, but it was largely the pleasure I took in seeing her again (though I did not confess it to her) that made my countenance so eloquent. Good tidings, did I say? Ah, but what of the rumored fate of her father and brothers communicated to me by the young Dominican? That must be, for the present at least, withheld from her.

"Yes," I answered, "Fra Salimbene is a friend among a thousand, and has suggested a plan which will, I firmly believe, work both your deliverance and my safety."

Then I unfolded the scheme which the worthy friar had proposed.

"Oh," she cried when I had finished, "there are no words by which I can thank you and him!"

"Nay," I said, "speak not of thanks! I were the veriest craven, and he most unpriestly, were we not ready to serve you to the last breath, and you will find, too, in my good follower Berthold an ardent defender."

Across the elation she felt over her prospective escape fell the shadow of the dread ever present with her in regard to her family. Her lip quivered.

"My father! my mother! my brothers!" she

murmured, "I am wicked to leave them, to be thus wrapt up in what threatens me, in the means of eluding my own peril!"

"Would they have you remain could they counsel you?" I asked, with eager vehemence. "Were it possible for you to be of any aid to them if you stayed, the case would be different."

"What you say is quite true," she assented mournfully. "I will be ready. I can easily slip the nun's dress over the gown I am now wearing. But how am I to gain egress from the garden? I have not your agility"—her mood quickly changed to one of charming playfulness —"and of course escape by the villa gate is not to be considered."

"We shall contrive somehow," I promised. "I will suggest to the good Berthold that he procure a ladder of rope," I added, measuring the height of the wall with my eye.

So we bade each other adieu, with renewed assurances on my part, and a half smiling, half mournful agreement on hers that she would be awaiting my coming on the morrow. I found Berthold strolling in the Via Santo, as I had suggested that he be doing, and together we repaired to the presence of Fra Salimbene. The friar and soldier fell, with small preamble of explanation, to perfecting an arrangement for departure from the city on the succeeding night. The sturdy Suabian agreed with me that the Traveler's Rest, which he recalled was still in existence,

would be a capital place for a rendezvous, and guaranteed that, with the aid of the funds which I was able to provide (I had returned from the East by no means impecunious), he would have five excellent animals equipped for mounting in the inn stable-yard at the next sunset hour.

Having added to Berthold's commission the purchase of a ladder of rope, I dismissed him, and then, as the morrow was likely to prove a busy one for Fra Salimbene, he and I began discussing just what course we were to pursue in effecting the rescue of Madonna Alfrieda. The nun's disguise the friar had already obtained; he had likewise arranged with a hardy peasant woman to be the maiden's companion, and had only to acquaint this person with the place and hour of meeting.

We finally agreed that we should repair together to the villa garden, and that while I as formerly, adventured within, the friar, as a matter of safeguard, should remain to watch without lest flight over the wall be undertaken at an inopportune moment. Although it had been my good fortune to encounter no wayfarers upon the path by the river branch, a loiterer might chance to be passing, and it was well to provide for a warning in case of such a contingency.

At last the hour for bidding farewell to the House of the Franciscans arrived. We had already dispatched such belongings as we deemed absolutely necessary to the Traveler's Rest, and

with the bundle containing Alfrieda's disguise and the rope ladder supplied by Berthold under my arm, I accompanied Fra Salimbene down the stairway, and into the early evening air. I must acknowledge that my heart-beats quickened as we struck into the laneway leading to the branch of the Bacchiglione. Seasoned campaigner that I was, here was a risk afoot in the like of which I had never engaged. Responsibility and hazard I had often taken, but they had always rested lightly upon my spirits. I was far from being depressed now, but I was fully alive to the seriousness of what we were attempting. To foil the intentions of Ezzelino da Romano was no light thing, particularly in a matter that touched him so closely as did this. Failure meant doom in one form or another for each one of us, but failure had no place in my thoughts.

We gained the rippling river water, and found no footfarer upon the path.

"Bravo!" cried I, "Lady Fortune favors us!"

"It were better to put our trust in the Virgin rather than in all the combined deities of ancient heathendom!" rebuked the friar.

Hastening to the spot where I had twice scaled the villa garden wall, I tapped sharply. Intently we hearkened for an answering sound, but none was heard, there was only the noise of the gurgling stream and a low leaf rustle.

"We may be a trifle early," I said, the shadow of disappointment clouding my face.

The friar made no response, yet I could detect from the occasional anxious look which he cast up and down the path that he was disturbed.

"Tap again!" he said presently.

I did so, but still there was no answer. After a space I gave the signal agreed upon the third time, and in vain.

"What can have happened?" I demanded.

Fra Salimbene shook his head.

"I will go within the garden," I decided at length, "approach the house, and discover if it seems deserted."

I handed the bundle containing the nun's dress and rope ladder to my companion, and in spite of his efforts to persuade me to delay a little, topped the wall, and gained the enclosure. The arbor was deserted as were the walks leading toward the villa. Along one of these, bordered by roses thick set between ilex boles, I ran on tiptoe, and had nearly reached a bend which would have disclosed the villa itself when I became aware that some one was hastening in my direction.

I sprang behind a rose clump, and peered intently between the the leaves. Then my heart gave a great bound of exultation for Alfrieda appeared speeding breathlessly, her eyes bright, her lips parted, her draperies streaming out behind her as she put forth every effort in her flight. I stepped into view at once so that she might not be alarmed on beholding me suddenly, waited until she gained my side, then caught her hand, and onward we raced together.

"I was just starting to meet you," she panted, when Messer Ansedisio, the Podesta, was announced. I was on the watch at the stair-head, and heard him tell Ser Petronio who has charge of the villa that the wedding would be the day after to-morrow. He bade him call me, in peremptory fashion, as he wished to announce the good news to me himself. How hatefully he laughed when he said this, the detestable creature! I concealed myself in a closet, and neither Ser Pertronio nor his wife discovered me. Messer Ansedisio, growing impatient, went up to aid them in their search, then I slipped down and out. They may be even now hard after me. What shall we do if they should follow?"

"We will manage in some way to evade them," I answered, though I could but wonder in what manner we should compass it.

Leaving Alfrieda in the laurel arbor, I bounded to the wall and called to Fra Salimbene,—

"The bundle, my friend! She has come at last!"

An instant later I had the nun's dress and the rope ladder in my hand. Springing back to the arbor I gave the disguise to Alfrieda, and then returned to the barrier to affix the ladder to its crest. I had just completed this task when upon the gravel of the pathway from the villa sounded the hurried and harsh crunch of footfalls. There was no opportunity for concealment. Indeed hardly had I time to loosen my girdle, whip out

my sword, and toss back my hood so that my sight should be in no wise obscured, when forth from the rose and ilex alley charged two men, Ansedisio leading.

"She must be in the garden," the second was saying, and then simultaneously they spied me.

"Whom have we here?" cried Ansedisio, plunging toward me, drawing his blade as he ran. "A friar, and armed!"

Scant of breath and mottle-faced at his back labored a hulking fellow whom I took to be Alfrieda's gaoler. He swung an ugly cudgel the sight of which made me uneasy.

A few paces from where I stood, my back set against the wall, they paused while Ansedisio scanned me intently.

"Ah," cried he, after an instant's scrutiny, an evil smile lifting one corner of his mouth, "I am indeed fortunate! This time, my friend Tiso, I know you, and I opine that the young lady of whom we are in search is not far away. How romantic it all is! I am sorry indeed to be obliged to interfere. But duty—stern duty—bids me! Will you put down your sword, or must I, with the aid of the worthy Ser Petronio here, use a little persuasion more potent than the argument of words?"

To bandy speech was wholly useless, so I remained silent, watching them both guardedly.

Ansedisio indulged in a hearty laugh.

"A friar!" he cried, "well, upon my word, it

has been very clever of you! But we have come to the prelude of the last act of the play, friend Tiso, an act which is likely to draw to a speedy close, for my uncle is far from being in a good humor. Once again, will you yield your sword? No? Really, I regret to cause you pain! You will have enough of that to endure later on. My uncle will have his little sport, as you are aware, being a Camposanpieresi! Now, Petronio, whilst I engage the gentleman, do you rush in upon him and administer one of your wholesome taps. Be not too gentle, for some friars are thick-headed!"

I realized that I was likely, and that speedily, to be in exceedingly bad case, for Ansedisio began to edge around upon my left so that he might give his companion an opening. I hesitated to make a dash at the bulky Petronio, lest a blow from his cudgel, which I observed he wielded dexterously, snap my blade. So I was kept dancing, menacing first one and then the other, and conscious that at any moment the end might come. And come it did after the most unexpected fashion. I had attacked Ansedisio for an instant, when Alfrieda, now garbed as a nun, having apparently just taken in my predicament, rushed from the arbor with a cry of alarm.

The Podesta's eye was for a second diverted, but that was long enough for me to slip by his guard, rip open the doublet sleeve of his sword arm, and inflict a wound that caused him to drop his weapon. Wheeling about to meet Ser Petronio

who, I expected, was slinking upon me with raised cudgel, I was just in time to behold Fra Salimbene (who had heard sounds of the struggle and managed to scramble to the wall top) descending upon him like a falcon on its prey. Amazed beyond measure, and not a little terrified, Alfrieda's clumsy gaoler was borne to the earth, his frantic screams practically muffled by the friar's enveloping robe.

"I believe," I remarked to Ansedisio, who was clutching his wounded arm, "that the play is not ended yet, and that your amiable uncle will be obliged to forego his sport, at least to-night."

The Podesta made a hateful grimace, cursing me thickly beneath his breath.

Noting that my spry friend Salimbene had completely subdued Ser Petronio, I called to Alfrieda who was regarding the scene with interest from a point not far distant.

"We need your kindly offices, Madonna," said I. "His Lordship, the Podesta, has dropped his sword, and I foresee that we are likely to have use for some rope. The ladder yonder is considerably too long. Do you not think that you could shorten it with Messer Ansedisio's blade?"

The girl made haste to carry out my suggestion, and again the Podesta cursed me, being heartily joined in this instance by Ser Petronio upon whose recumbent form Fra Salimbene was sitting somewhat heavily.

It did not take long to truss the twain securely,

gag them with strips of their own garments, and bear them to the laurel arbor.

I would not leave Ansedisio without binding up his wound, but when I had accomplished this I could not refrain from remarking, as I left him,—

"I wish you a pleasant rest, Messer Podesta!"

CHAPTER XIII

OUT OF PADUA

Beneath the wall we paused a space for conference.

"Tell me, Madonna," said Fra Salimbene, taking the initiative, "are other men beside Ser Petronio employed yonder at the villa?"

"None," Alfrieda answered. "He, his wife, three maids and myself have been its sole occupants. There have been working men about the grounds, but never later than mid-afternoon.

"Good!" cried the friar. "Most excellent! I think instead of making our exit by the rope ladder here, we may as well abandon that, and depart decorously by the gate. If we encounter Ser Petronio's spouse, I fancy we can persuade her not to raise an alarm, and can contrive to satisfy her in regard to the whereabouts of her husband and their exalted caller."

I did not deem it worth while to question what was working in Fra Salimbene's mind, but contented myself with walking by Alfrieda's side, she looking vastly pretty in her nun's garb. As we approached the villa I noticed that she became agitated and apprehensive, and inquired the cause.

"Donna Maria, Ser Petronio's wife, is nothing short of a virago," she confided to me. "I fear you may have some trouble with her if she suspects that anything has gone amiss."

"I infer that she has charge of the villa keys," said the friar, smiling to himself.

"Yes, all save the great key to the outer gate she generally carries about with her. That, on account of its size, is left within the gate itself."

"Better and better!" exclaimed Fra Salimbene. "Should we encounter this redoubtable person our manner of dealing with her must be left to inspiration. Ah," he added, pointing to a branching pathway, "let us see if this will not lead us to the entrance to the garden."

Winding between great banks of rhododendrons, we erelong emerged in an open space before the villa. No one was within sight, but we heard a strident voice reiterating some inquiry within.

"Either you, Madonna, or Ser Petronio, appears to be much in demand," observed Fra Salimbene. "Suppose, Tiso, you and Madonna Alfrieda proceed to the gate, which you might unlock. I will try my powers of persuasion, which are sometimes effective, upon the vociferous lady."

He moved toward the villa door, while Alfrieda and I started to carry out his bidding. What an untold relief and comfort it was to stand there, the massive gate unfastened, the key in my hand and the knowledge in my heart that only one more gate—and that the city's—reared itself between the maiden at my side and her freedom! In such worshipful wise did I find myself gazing into her eyes that I suddenly realized she was blushing, and that divinely.

Whilst I was making some stammering apology the friar was ascending the villa steps. Ere he had a chance to sound a summons the door was thrown open, and the aperture filled by a tall woman with a masculine cast of features who, on beholding the friar, started back, her mouth agape. Her angle of vision seemed not to extend beyond the bowing figure before her, and taking advantage of her bewilderment, the friar passed within.

"With your permission," we heard him say, as he closed the door.

"What can he mean to do?" queried Alfrieda.

"I am as much in the dark as you are," I returned, "but rest assured, he will contrive in some way to render the woman harmless. I have the most supreme confidence in him."

Much as it would have rejoiced me under some circumstances to linger alone with the maid who companioned me, I began to grow impatient when five, then ten, minutes elapsed, and Fra Salimbene did not appear. Dusk was swiftly closing in, and I knew that in less than half an hour the Porta di Santa Croce would be closed. Escape from the city would then be practically impossible. Even the friar's eloquence would be of no avail. Only an order from one high in authority—the Vicar or the Podesta—would act as an open sesame.

At last the villa portal swung wide, and down the steps agilely hastened Fra Salimbene, his lips a-twitch with mirth.

"May the holy Virgin pardon me" he ejaculated, as he came within speaking distance.

Our countenances must have been ardent with interrogation, for he went on as we passed outside the gate,—

"Yonder Donna is a most superstitious woman, and I made a very bold play upon her weakness as soon as I discovered it. She believes it her duty, in order to secure her husband's safe return, to spend the night in prayer. She has already begun her devotions, and I fancy is likely to continue them in some wise until dawn, for the door of her apartment is locked, and the servants warned not to disturb her. I dropped a hint as I was leaving that if the good Ser Petronio had not put in an appearance at daybreak, it might be advisable to search for him in the vicinity of a certain laurel arbor," and Fra Salimbene fairly held his sides.

Here truly was the friar in a new role, and Alfrieda and I joined in his mirth as I locked the gate of the villa behind us and cast the key into the waters of the Bacchiglione.

"The precious Ser Petronio, his spouse and the Podesta are welcome to the use of our rope ladder," said I. "They certainly will not in a hurry fare forth through this entrance!"

"Hist!" cried the friar suddenly, "whom have we here?"

The swift veer of his tone from jocularity to seriousness, from triumph to alarm, sent a chill of apprehension through me, which was increased

when I saw, striding toward us through the gathering dusk,four of Ezzelino's body-guard, the Saracens.

"They are attendants of the Vicar," said I. "If we face and pass them unconcernedly, it is not at all likely they will detain us whatever their mission may be. You had best drop your veil," I added to Alfrieda.

Hassan, the chief of the Saracen guards, was one of the four, and while his companions gave no heed to us, I noted that he regarded us sharply as we made room for them. I also observed, stealing a look over my shoulder, that the Saracens paused at the villa gate, and began sounding a summons for admission.

Fra Salimbene was likewise cognizant of the pause of the guardsmen.

"Our watchword must be 'haste,' " said he, "as soon as he reach the corner yonder," and he pointed to where an alley crossed the river branch.

"Those men," questioned Alfrieda, "they were the Vicar's hirelings, were they not?"

"They were," I replied, realizing what was working in her mind, and deeming it not wise to attempt any deception, "and though for some cause they have been sent on Ansedisio's heels, you must not feel alarmed, for we will circumvent them all."

"Now," I said, when we reached the alleyway, "your hand, Madonna, and do you take her other hand, Padre Mio. Let us do a little running until we near the Via Santa Croce!"

So away we flew, sending our hopes, our desires, our prayers, an eager brood, ahead of us. Would the Porta Santa Croce be closed? And if so, what then? For the friar and myself there still might be concealment somewhere among the Franciscan brothers, but for Alfrieda! For her we knew no place of refuge. There was no religious institution in the city into which the pitiless hand of the Paduan tyrant would not reach to pluck her forth. And who, save the members of some holy order, was there to befriend her? No, her only salvation lay beyond the walls, and our aid was her sole dependence!

A sharp bend, and we were in the Via Santa Croce. Who were passing? A stream of peasants, and they were making toward the gate! Exultation mounted within my breast. Assuredly they would be allowed to return to their hovels clustered without the walls, these belated bringers of market produce! The gateway was in sight when we were halted by a stoppage of the procession, and heard an outburst of angry words. From one to another ran excited exclamations.

"The keepers refuse us egress. It is the closing hour. Down with them! Shall we not be permitted to go to our homes?"

Furious murmurs arose on all sides, curses and open threats of violence.

"Come!" exclaimed Fra Salimbene, and began elbowing his way through the throng.

Into the opening which he made Alfrieda and I

diligently pressed. Soon, observing the garb we wore, the crowd made way for us. As we drew near the massive stone archway we descried three guardsmen holding the folk back with pikes, while two others were in the act of swinging shut the ponderous leaves of the gate.

"Stay!" cried Fra Salimbene, thrusting aside a burly peasant, and confronting the pikemen, "who commands here?"

Recognizing a leader, the threatening cries of the throng were hushed.

"I command," replied one of the three, lowering his weapon. "What would you?"

"Exit from the city for myself, my companions," indicating Alfrieda and myself, "and, indeed, for all these good people!"

Although the head gateman saw he had a determined force to deal with, he was still inclined to be obdurate.

"The regulations are most strict," he demurred, "and the orders to carry them out stringent. These people know the laws, and should have been at their homes ere this. They are greedy for the last copper. Let them spend the night here in the street, and learn their lesson!"

Fra Salimbene skillfully changed his point of attack.

"You are a worthy officer," said he, "but must we suffer," again indicating Alfrieda and myself, "while you carry out the letter of the law in punishing these folk? Yonder at the Traveler's Rest

we are awaited, and it is a matter of life and death."

The officer misconstrued the friar's meaning. Certainly it was very possible for him to infer that we were bent upon an errand of mercy, that we were bearing spiritual alleviation to some unfortunate soul racked upon a bed of suffering.

He lowered his pike, and signaled to his companions to do likewise; at the same time he bade the two cease in their efforts to shut the heavy gate.

"I am not so callous," said he, "as to withhold consolation from any human creature about quitting this world. We shall all need such holy ministration one day. You may pass."

"And these good people?" queried the friar, making no move as yet to take advantage of the victory he had won.

"Oh, they may pass, too,—this time!"

And so, carried forward by the joyful impetus of that escaping flood, we were swept out of Padua.

CHAPTER XIV

INTO THE NIGHT AND STORM

A few of the peasants paused in their homeward hastening to breathe words of blessing upon the friar for his friendly interposition, but most of them betook themselves in the direction of their respective hovels without speech, save for muttered anathemas against the gate-keepers. By the time the welcome sign-board of the Traveler's Rest became distinguishable the last had disappeared. The main doorway of the inn was agape, and when we were about a dozen paces distant the fully accoutered bulk of Berthold filled it. He beamed broadly upon us.

"You lift a great weight from my mind," he said. "I began to fear that your plans might have miscarried. I have been dancing like an animal of the wilds betwixt this spot and the stable-yard for an half hour or more."

"Is all in readiness?" demanded Fra Salimbene. "There have been some unforeseen delays which we will explain later."

"You can mount this instant," returned Berthold.

"The lady's companion?" questioned the friar.

"Awaits her, already mounted."

"This," said I, indicating Alfrieda, "is the maiden of whom I have told you. She merits and

needs your service far more than I ever have done, my friend."

Alfrieda put her small hand unhesitatingly into the Suabian's huge, ungauntleted palm, and with her appealing smile straightway won the old trooper's heart.

"'We shall be good comrades, I am sure," she said.

"All there is of me," he exclaimed, "and that's considerable, will ever be at the Madonna's command!"

Close upon Berthold's heels we hurried through the tavern hallway to the stable-yard where the host, whose obsequious greed the soldier had liberally salved, was overseeing two grooms in charge of the horses. Seated contentedly upon one of the animals was a strapping woman whom the friar made known to us as Grisanta, Alfrieda's companion. Her face was indicative of kindliness, her figure of endurance.

"I would not have ventured to get into the saddle, Ladyship," she said to Alfrieda, "save that Messere commanded," and she nodded to Berthold.

"You acted quite properly," commented Fra Salimbene. "This is no time for ceremony."

My good friend and servitor assigned our mounts, and after I had seen Alfrieda comfortably disposed upon a mild-dispositioned bay, and spoken to her words of assurance and cheer, it was with fine exhilaration that I gripped with my knees the sides of a sturdy chestnut. There and

then I took occasion to compliment Berthold on his choice of horse flesh, for every one of our steeds seemed in prime condition. I did not especially fancy the way in which the mottled gray that the friar bestrode laid his ears back, but often when it comes to a trial of speed or endurance, temper is not the worst equine characteristic.

"You understand, do you not," I said to the host of the Traveler's Rest, as we debouched into the highway, "that we ride to Mantua?"

"It is deeply impressed upon me, Lordship," said the man cringingly.

"Then, good night," I cried, "and see that the impression does not fade from your mind!"

We struck into a steady gait, Fra Salimbene and myself leading, Alfrieda with Grisanta following, while Berthold brought up the rear. The women were both good riders, and I saw no reason why our progress should be in any wise retarded.

"I fear," said the friar presently, "that we shall be readily traced. There are the gate-keepers, and that glib-tongued tavern-holder, despite his oily promises. I am inclined to think, too, that the pursuit will not be long in getting under way. Those Saracens are likely to discover something wrong at the villa, and will immediately report it. We had best call a brief halt erelong and confer with Berthold."

It had been our intention to push forward through the night to Ferrara, fatiguing journey though it would have been for Alfrieda, for we had

trusted that her escape would not be discovered until the coming day. The case in which we now found ourselves was different. Any hard-riding body of troopers, setting out shortly, would be sure to overtake us, unless by some detour, some unexpected move, we could elude those pursuing. Soldiers would doubtless be dispatched toward Mantua, toward Vincenza, toward Venice, toward Ferrara. Would they be sent toward Chioggia? I conjectured that they would not, and when we halted just beyond Abano, it was Chioggia that I advocated.

"By choosing this city as our destination," I said, "we are less likely to be captured than we are if we continue by any other route. If we are fortunate, and avoid detention, in spite of the detours necessary, we shall have reached the port by dawn. Should no boat be sailing for Ravenna, we can hire one. From Ravenna we can travel northward at our leisure to Ferrara."

"Whether you would have made an astute churchman," remarked the friar, "I cannot guess. I know this, however,—you are a cunning strategist. Think you not so, Messer Berthold?"

"Speak your mind!" I cried. "I am not ordering you, in this instance, but taking counsel with you!"

"We are wholly of one opinion, Capitano," said the Suabian, addressing me with affection and pride in his tone. "Let us by all means make for Chioggia. Shall we ride as far as Battaglia, and

then bend toward the coast? We can hurry past the town as though seeking Ferrara, and then turn eastward."

"Excellent!" ejaculated the friar and I in a breath. "On, then!"

And so we plunged forward into the night, giving our horses free rein.

It had been a sultry day with scant breeze stirring, whatever light airs there were being from the south, and with the failing and disappearance of the sun little relief had been afforded man or beast. There was the same oppressive atmosphere, close, heavy, enervating. Now along the southern horizon heat-lightning began to throb and pulsate, at first in lines and streamers, and then in vast blinding waves that swept sudden and sheer across the whole area of the heavens. Before we reached Battaglia there was an ominous growl in the distance, and when the next sheet of flame flashed over the sky we descried a huge bulwark of cloud mounting rapidly toward the zenith. It seemed to grow and spread during each interval of illumination, and its dimensions were portentous.

"We are about to encounter a tempest," said Fra Salimbene, leaning toward me, "and shall be forced to seek shelter. It is most unfortunate, for our pursuers are sure to push on. We cannot, however, subject Madonna Alfrieda to the violence of such a storm as this is likely to be."

"We might reach Battaglia before it bursts," said I, "for I judge the town to be not more than

half a mile ahead, "but entering the gates would be like putting our heads into a noose."

"Yes, that would never do. We must not venture within the walls. There is a partially built monastery by the roadside not very far in advance. Perhaps we had best pause there."

"We may be compelled to," I answered, for at that moment a fierce gust tore at us, to be succeeded by a distant moaning like the sound of surf upon a remote shore. The lightning flashes continued, and now and then there was a deafening report.

"We must hasten!" I called back to the women. "Urge your horses! There is a place of refuge near!"

Soon the wind commenced to blow steadily and powerfully, and a few large drops of rain fell.

"There!" cried the friar, as the glare in the heaven was unusually prolonged, "to our right!"

Hard at hand loomed the walls of a rambling, partially completed building. It was windowless, but the roof had apparently been finished.

Drawing rein, and bidding Alfrieda, her companion and Berthold halt, I announced that we had reached our refuge, and explained what the building was. We had all of us just turned our horses' heads toward the gaping main entrance door, when an untoward happening befell us. At one corner of the monastery stood a group of lime trees, one much loftier than the rest, a noble bole with symmetrical, spreading branches.

Suddenly the whole universe, all heaven and earth, appeared to be naught but a reeling chaos of dazzling white light. There was a sound like the crack of doom; our horses plunged madly, Fra Salimbene's uttering a frenzied neigh of terror. Down crashed the tall lime smitten asunder by the terrific bolt, some of its smaller limbs whipping the ground about us. Directly succeeding, there was a flash, this one harmless, and when in half-dazed solicitude I glanced swiftly about for the members of our party, lo, the friar was missing!

"Fra Salimbene!" I cried, "where is he?"

"His horse bolted!" exclaimed Berthold. "I was nearly upset by the creature as it made off."

"I pray that he will get control of him and return," I said, as I led the way to the monastery.

The loss of the friar would prove little short of a calamity. His counsel was invaluable, he was brave, and not without a willingness to lend a fighting hand at a pinch, and he had a knowledge of the roads which Berthold and I lacked.

It was not a time, however, to stand lamenting misfortune, unexpected and deplorable as it was. Berthold and I helped the women to dismount, and while I found a sheltered corner for them, the Suabian managed to quiet the still trembling horses. Finally we got the steeds cared for, and just then the tempest burst.

I had experienced violent storms both by land and sea, but never had I encountered aught more terrific than that one. Unimpeded by a single

obstacle, it rushed in from the Adriatic, broke upon the Euganean hills behind us to return in great swirling currents and backward eddies, and through it all pulsated the lightning almost incessantly.

It was with infinite admiration that I observed Alfrieda's bearing. It was my pleasure to remain closely by her side, speaking now and then a re-assuring word, giving voice to my belief that the anger of the elements would soon abate, and we be able to resume our journey. Once in reply to an expression of this kind she looked upon me with a sad smile, saying,—

"After all, kinsman Tiso," for thus would she usually call me, "what is this mad riot of rain and wind, this unbridled fury of nature, compared with the storms of heart and soul through which you and I have passed! It is as nothing!"

We were lamenting the disappearance of the good Fra Salimbene when the wind failed and the rain slackened. I strode to the entrance of our shelter, and stood peering out. What noise was that borne to my ears? Could I mistake it? Nay, it was the clear rattling, ringing sound of tempered harness mingled with rapid rhythmic hoof-beats near by upon the Padua road!

Pursuers! Should our horses detect the coming of their kindred, unless their heads were muffled they would send forth challenge or greeting, and discovery be inevitable.

"Berthold," I shouted, "the horses!"

But he, too, had detected the approach of troopers, and when I gained the tethering place of the animals he was already there. I had doffed my friar's disguise soon after we left the Traveler's Rest, but the robe was still flung across the saddle-bow, and I cast it over the muzzle of my own steed, and was drawing it about that of another when the second creature caught the noise of hoof-beats, flung up its head ere I could get a firm grip upon the bridle, and emitted a penetrating neigh. The echoes of that call, reduplicated by the yet unplastered walls, must have surged forth upon the outer air with a blast akin to that of a trumpet.

I sprang back.

"Guard the window-space in front, Berthold!" I cried, "I will look after the door!"

As I gained my post the troop was just halting without, perhaps thirty yards distant from the monastery which was somewhat removed from the highway. One of the intermittent flashes revealed them to me as their leader was in the act of giving them a command, and they were wheeling toward us,—five, ten, fifteen Saracens!

I heard Berthold's angry grunt of disgust. We were indeed trapped, unless we scrambled from one of the open window-spaces and scurried away on foot, seeking concealment somewhere in the rain-drenched hollows of the adjacent hills. I was about putting into excution this desperate plan when, like the white bolt out of the open sky that dismembered the lordly lime, a blow descended upon

the swart minions of Ezzelino now but a short lance-cast from the monastery door.

I had a presage of deliverance ere any warning of danger came to the ears of the Saracens, for as I turned to consider the most likely means of egress, I beheld through one of the openings a line of horsemen swiftly speeding along the southern monastery wall. Helmets, hauberks, breastplates, greaves,—they were all in silver gray, and their accoutrements shone like moon-burnished lake water.

Before there was time to hazard a conjecture in regard to their identity, there was the harsh gritting of iron-clad hoofs upon sand and stone fragments as the new-comers spurred around the corner of the building. Then the war cry—"Este! Este!" rent the night, and the furious combat was on.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GRAY RIDERS OF ESTE

Este!—The Marquis Azzo Novello, the seventh of that name, was one of Ezzelino's most ancient and bitter foes. For years the two men had been sworn enemies, opponents in all lines of policy, civil and clerical. Although in this protracted struggle the head of the Romanesi had most frequently been triumphant, and although he had for a considerable period been in possession of the city of Este, and the castle which dominates it, the ancestral seat of the lordly house, there never had been on Azzo Novello's part any inclination to give up the fight for ascendancy. Quiescent he might be for a time, but this was only because he desired to recuperate his forces and his fortunes for a new effort against the Vicar of the Marches whom he regarded as none other than Anti-Christ, the very scourge of mankind. All this had been communicated to me by Fra Salimbene when we had discussed our destination, Ferrara, of which the Marquis was over-lord.

How a detachment of the Marquis of Este's forces chanced to be so far within the confines of Ezzelino's domain was an enigma, but that the dozen men who before my eyes were hacking blithely at the Saracens were followers of Azzo Novello I did not for an instant doubt.

At the first onset the hireling heathen were

sorely smitten. Three of their number were unhorsed, and several others wounded, and yet so gallantly did they recover themselves, and so skillfully maneuver, they being remarkable horsemen, that in an incredibly short space the combat was equal, man to man. And then, to our dismay, the gray-garbed riders began slowly to give ground. There is, in all the world, as is well known, no finer soldier than the Saracen, especially if he be well mounted. He is a part of the creature which he rides. His armor is light, but at the same time capable of sustaining blows of terrific impact. His tactics are swift and unexpected, in short he is an adversary to be both respected and feared.

As I watched the cut, thrust and parry going on before the monastery with apprehension—the lightning was still unabated—I felt a touch upon my arm. It was Alfrieda. In her demeanor there was no trace of alarm.

"These strangers who are contending with our pursuers, can you conjecture who they may be?" she asked. "I heard them shout 'Este!' Are they soldiers of the Marquis, think you?"

"They must be," said I, "but what puzzles me is this,—how chance they to be so near Padua?"

"I think I know now!" she exclaimed, "and I might have thought of it ere this. Not long since father was remarking to some one that the Marquis had re-captured his castle of Arlio in the Euganean hills, and was harrying Ezzelino's

men whenever opportunity offered. These soldiers must be a detachment from the castle garrison."

"Every shadow of doubt in regard to them is removed, Madonna," said I, "and they are fighting our battle, though they are not aware of it. It were beneath us, Berthold and myself, to let them do this without lending our swords, do you not think so?"

I noted her hesitation, her agitation, though she was quick to recover herself.

"It were unseemly of me not to bid you God-speed in striking a blow for the right cause. Go! go! and heaven help you!"

That she was perturbed, that she was anxious on my behalf, spurred me as never anything had done before. I caught her hand and pressed it to my lips.

"Berthold! Berthold!" I called.

He was at my side in an instant.

"We are needed yonder to turn the tide against those furious Saracens. Let us mount, and, when we note our chance, charge out of the doorway into the press shouting 'Este' that there may be no doubt in regard to which side we favor."

"It shall be as you say, Messer Tiso. Ever since those blackamoors hove in view my sword had been uneasy in its scabbard."

Speedily we were in our saddles, waiting just back from the monastery portal for the smiting chance we sought. Presently it came. Directly before us was a wide space into which we could

rush and catch two of the Saracens upon the flank. As we urged forward simultaneously, we raised the Este battle cry, and the monastery echoes roared it with us. A slanting drift of rain lashed our faces as we emerged into the open, but we plunged and wheeled and struck true. Down went the hirelings of Ezzelino, and those of the gray riders who saw their fall took up exultantly the shout which we had uttered. They could not guess our identity; they saw by our habits that we were not of their company, but our deed proclaimed us friends.

Berthold made terrible play with his long weapon. On horseback his lameness did not trouble him, and he raged among the heathen like one possessed, until at length they scattered. It was no rout, however, for they concentrated at a little distance as though they contemplated returning to the attack. This they at length decided not to do, for they finally retired, not in the direction of Padua, but toward Battaglia, leaving our possession of the field undisputed.

Around Berthold and myself gathered the members of the gray riders.

"Signori," cried one of them, a light-haired, erect, vigorous man of about my own age, "whomsoever you may be, we salute you. You fight like heroes. In the name of the Marquis of Este, accept our thanks!"

"Rather, valiant soldiers all, should we thank you," I returned. "We are fugitives from Padua

having in charge a lady and her companion who are now in the monastery near us, and the hirelings of the Lord of the Marches with whom you have just fought were in pursuit of us."

"Ha!" exclaimed the spokesman of the gray riders, "a good deed done! We were abroad, as is our frequent custom, to strike a blow at your satanic Paduan ruler, and admirably have we accomplished our intent, it would seem. Whither fly you, Signori, if I may make bold to inquire? It is possible that we may be of further aid."

"We are for Ferrara," I returned, then I told him of our intended route, and of the unfortunate disappearance of Fra Salimbene.

"You have seen the last of your friar for this night," said the soldier. "He is undoubtedly mired somewhere in the marshes. And as for Chioggia, you would never reach it. You, too, would soon find yourself deep in the ooze of a road which the storm has rendered impassable. I have, Signori, a proposal to make, if you would care to listen."

"By all means proceed," said I.

"First let me introduce myself. I am the Conte di Luggio, commanding Castel Arlio, the hold of his Lordship, the Marquis of Este, in the Euganean hills."

"And I am Tiso of the Camposanpieresi."

"Messer Camposanpiero, I have heard the story of your family, and I trust you will not think it presuming in me if I express to you my profound sympathy."

"You are most kind, and I appreciate the tender of such feelings."

"What I have to propose is this,—that you accompany us to the castle of Arlio, a ride of perhaps three hours by the path which we must traverse. Within a day or two the Marquis is expected with a considerable force. He will tarry but briefly, and in his company you and your charge can journey to Ferrara."

"Messer di Luggio," I cried, "you put us under the deepest obligations, and lift a great weight from my mind. I accept your offer with sincere gratitude."

Then suddenly I thought of Fra Salimbene. What of him? Could I desert him thus? So fully had the safety of Alfrieda occupied my mind, driven all else out of consideration, that for the nonce, perhaps to my shame, the friar had been utterly forgotten.

I mentioned my predicament to the count.

"I can leave two men behind to escort and guide you," he suggested, "if you would feel more comfortable to wait awhile and see if your friend appears. You can than follow on at such time as you deem best."

I thanked him heartily.

"I should never forgive myself for deserting so brave and unselfish a friend and comrade," I said.

"I quite understand," he remarked, "but, as I before stated, I am fully persuaded that the

unfortunate man will spend the night in the marshes."

The fury of the storm had passed away to the northward ere this, and through the wind-driven scud the stars were beginning to show their lance-like points. There was still an occasional faint flush of aerial fire in the distance, and by the pallid light of one of these fitful illuminations I saw Alfrieda framed in the door of the monastery. Although I was sure that I was placing her in the best of hands, my soul rebelled that I was not to be the one to ride by her side as her chief protector on the further dark journey through the night. But my decision had been made, and so dismounting, and asking the Conte di Luggio to accompany me, I forthwith presented him to Alfrieda.

"This gallant gentleman and Berthold," I said, in conclusion, "will safeguard you until I can rejoin you, I hope in company with our good friend the friar."

Alfrieda uttered a little exclamation of dismay.

"You are to remain here?"

"I am to have the company of two stout soldiers," I assured her, "and there will be no danger from the Saracens. They will not return, but Fra Salimbene will endeavor to unless he has lost his bearings entirely. When you rise in the morning I trust that I shall be on hand to greet you."

When those of the gray riders who had received wounds had been ministered to by their companions,

the Conte di Luggio gave orders for the troop to form in marching array. In the center of the little cavalcade the two women were placed, Berthold being close at hand; then when I had said adieu for the time being to Alfrieda and our cordial benefactor, the company defiled into the darkness.

It was far from being a cheerful task that I had set myself, this tarrying for one who, in all probability, would not appear, and those who had been commanded to keep me company were inclined to regard the enforced watch in the light of an imposition, nor could I blame them. And yet I felt it incumbent upon me to remain. Fra Salimbene would have done as much and more for me, I was sure.

After much effort I contrived to break through the wall of reserve and resentment which my companions raised, and once this victory was achieved, and an exchange of campaigning experiences begun, we speedily were on a very friendly footing. The two men, though both were considerably older than myself, had never been out of Italy, and while they were seasoned veterans in many home wars, and had many vivid tales to relate, I could more than match them when it came to a matter of the picturesque and unusual in warfare by scenes which I had witnessed and dangers which I had encountered in the East.

Thus, in martial reminiscences, two hours wore away, and it drew on to midnight. When a bell

in one of the Battaglia steeples flung its twelve silvery strokes upon the air, I started from where we had been crouching.

"My deep thanks are yours, for your patience, my friends," I said to the two gray riders. "I am convinced that further delay here is useless. Let us be off!"

"Gladly, Cavaliere!" they cried heartily, and we turned our backs on the monastery and made for the hills. But before we took our departure what did those scarred troopers do, in a freak of grim hilarity, but drag the bodies of the Saracens who had been slain in the encounter and prop them up on each side of the monastery door. It struck them as a huge joke, the consternation that would smite the monkish builders on beholding the stark sentries, but I must confess on me the point of the jest was lost.

One of my companions before me and one behind, we turned erelong from what seemed to be a fairly level and well-traveled highway into by-paths that penetrated dark clefts in the hills, now ascending sharply, now descending abruptly, ever winding, and most of the time shrouded in gloom. But there was no faltering, no hesitation, on the part of him who led. If during all that black pilgrimage we passed the haunts of men, as occasionally we must have done, I was unaware of it save once, and then because the trooper guiding checked his horse, allowed me to come abreast, clutched my arm, and pointed upward.

"There," said he, "is one of the strong places of Ezzelino da Romano."

I was conscious of a massive tower far above outlined against the sky, and that was all.

After we had ridden about two hours the troopers produced some food from their saddle-bags which they were good enough to share with me, and we rested on the grassy bank of a brawling water-course while we ate.

The first lines of light were beginning to lace the east when we emerged from the byways, and struck upon a wider, upward-trending road.

"Arlio is close at hand," said he who came behind, and sure enough in a few minutes out of the grayness loomed the castle walls upon an eminence above us.

First one and then the other of my companions uttered a peculiar holloa which was immediately repeated from one of the towers guarding the now visible gate. There was a rattle of chains as the draw-bridge was dropped and the portcullis was raised.

"Has the Conte di Luggio and his party arrived?" I inquired of one of the guards, as we entered the courtyard.

"Yes, Messer, some time since," was the answer, so, easy in mind, I cast myself upon the soldier's pallet in the room assigned me, and gave myself over to the luxury of slumber.

CHAPTER XVI

AT CASTEL ARLIO

Although Castel Arlio had been built by one of the ancestors of the present Marquis of Este as a pleasure retreat, a refuge when the heats of the summer became intense upon the low-lying lands of his domain, the place lacked none of the defences that safeguard a stronghold of war. Looking down craggy declivities into a narrow gorge on two sides, upon the other two it dominated slopes that were by no means gentle, and were free from a shrouding growth of any character save at their very base where the olive orchards of the hamlet of Arlio spread their silvery gray boughs.

The fortress had fallen into Ezzelino's hands through stratagem, and had been retaken by Azzo Novello in similar fashion. The latter was now occupying it solely for the purpose of baiting his ancient enemy, and not with the intent of maintaining a permanent garrison there. This he would not consider doing until his fortunes gave stronger warrant.

The castle was irregular in shape, following the contour of the hill-crest on which it was situated. In addition to the main eastern gateway, there were two posterns giving access to lateral valleys by means of footpaths. Beside the arcaded court, in the center of which was a well which

furnished a never-failing supply of sweet water, there was a southward facing terrace super-imposed upon a buttress of rock, and thrown out as it were from the side of the castle. Although it was protected by a wall of solid masonry, it was not in any sense fortified, nor did it need to be, for from it there was a sheer drop of at least forty feet to the sharp teeth of sun-scorched crags. A short passage and half a dozen cliff-hewn steps gave access to it, and it was here, having been directed by an idle member of the garrison, that I found Alfrieda at mid-morning of the day following my lonely night march. She was accompanied by the Conte di Luggio, who was pointing out to her certain objects of interest in the wonderful sweep of landscape which the terrace commanded.

Comparing his immaculate attire with my travel-worn and stained accoutrement, his bonhommie with my own somewhat grave demeanor, I felt a sharp thrill akin to jealousy pierce my heart. Yet it lasted but the barest breathing space, for when Alfrieda turned at the sound of my footsteps, there was a welcoming warmth in her eyes that was fairer to see than the morning. The pang passed, and from that hour I never knew it again.

"Let the Conte di Luggio preen himself however so gaily," I told myself, "it will be only the surface favor that he will win from the queen of maids!"

"I have already learned," was Alfrieda's first remark, while her eyes still held mine, and the delicate rose of her cheeks ripened, "that you heard naught of Fra Salimbene."

"Nothing," I said. "Doubtless Messer di Luggio's conjecture was correct. I am not inclined, however, to feel anxious about him, for he is a man of much resource. In all probability we shall discover his whereabouts erelong in Ferrara. But he, on his part, will be greatly worried about us."

"I would, then, that it might be given to him to see us at this moment. Indeed I wish he might share our good fortune," and she dropped a courtesy to the count.

"The good fortune, methinks, is ours, Madonna," returned Di Luggio gallantly.

"I have just been telling Madonna Deslemaini," continued he, addressing me, "that I am acquainted with her Ferrara cousins, and a queer pair they are, though one of them, the elder, (both, indeed, are quite in middle life) had he not taken it into his head to remain a bachelor, would, I believe, have made something of a man. The other, paradoxical as it may sound, has been unmade by his wife," and he laughed lightly at his quip.

"If they will but take me in," said Alfrieda gravely, "I am sure I shall be able to put up with their queernesses."

"You will bring into their shut and musty old palace halls the sunlight they need!" cried Di Luggio.

At that instant something impalpable, indefinable, caused both the count and myself to turn. Upon the upper step of the flight leading down to the terrace stood an extraordinary figure of a man. He was short, little above four feet, yet well proportioned in the main, save that his arms were of unusual length. He was very powerfully and compactly built, had much grace for one so grotesque in appearance, in fact his features might have been called handsome by those fancying the exceedingly dark type in man or woman.

It flashed upon me that Di Luggio was disturbed. Just the ghost of a shadow flitted athwart his good nature. I am certain Alfrieda failed to observe it, but I had a shrewd suspicion that the man above us was cognizant of it, and was pleased rather than otherwise. Before the subtle impression was gone I heard the count speaking Alfrieda's name and mine, then saying,

"Let me present my lieutenant, the officer next in command, Osimo da Feltre."

The man made us obeisance from where he stood, and his ease somehow surprised me. I was likewise taken aback by the melody of his voice. Yet there was an insinuating quality in it which affected me unpleasantly. Then he descended the steps, and once more I was astonished, this time by the air with which he carried himself. He entered at once into the conversation, and without appearing to do so contrived to shape the current of it. Thus we stood chatting for some moments until

finally Alfrieda excused herself, saying she desired to seek out her companion Grisanta. A little later with Di Luggio and his aid I adjourned to the courtyard, then the two went away together while I made a tour of observation upon the battlements with one of my companions of the previous night.

Toward noon I chanced upon the count, and was drawn apart by him into one of the secluded watch towers. Here he spoke in this wise.

"I am somewhat of a believer in first impressions, and desire to ask you what yours are of my in more ways than one remarkable lieutenant."

"His is doubtless a strong personality," I volunteered, "but I do not think that I should care to trust him."

He nodded.

"Your inner sense and mine coincide exactly!" he exclaimed.

"Tell me of this Da Feltre."

"He is comparatively new to us of Ferrara, but he is in some way related to the wife of the Marquis, and has managed to rise rapidly in favor, in spite of the strange stories which are abroad of his doings at Piacenza where he held office under the Marquis Pelavicini. What puzzles me most in regard to him is this. Why he should wish the post which he occupies to which I am positive he got himself appointed, supplanting a good comrade of mine? The taking of Castel Arlio was a hazardous affair which I persuaded upon

the Marquis to allow me to attempt chiefly to remind the arch-fiend of a Vicar that we have not forgotten him. You see Azzo Novello has a romantic affection for Arlio, and has hated to think of the soldiery of Ezzelino lazing within its walls. We gave the beggars one mighty lively evening a few months back, I promise you," and the count chuckled at the recollection.

"But why should this Da Feltre, who delights in the ease of courts and the smiles of women—oh, he is a brave ogler and payer of compliments!—why should he take it into his head to immure himself here where frugality is perforce the rule, and where there are no women but scullions (save now the lovely Madonna Deslemaini) to dance attendance on? Answer me that, Messer Camposanpiero!"

"Certainly it seems most strange!"

"Strange indeed! I cannot figure it out unless it is that Da Feltre is now, and has been all along, in the confidence and employ of that devil yonder in Padua! I am speaking plainly to you who are well nigh a stranger, but you are a gentleman and a soldier, I need no further proof of that than what I have already witnessed, and I may find it necessary to call upon you for counsel and assistance, who can say! Finally, let me whisper this in your ear. This Da Feltre is a dangerous man with women. I have heard it whispered that he has some strange power over them. You may be here but a brief time, but it were well to be on your guard."

I knitted my brows.

"By the mass," I cried, "he had best be cautious!"

"Several days since I had two of the most trustworthy of my men placed as special night guards at the posterns. This was directly after Da Feltre had several times ridden forth from the castle alone. Ezzelino's troopers are continually prowling about the neighborhood, and it is never our custom to send forth less than half a dozen men together. When I spoke to Da Feltre in regard to the risk he ran he answered me in this fashion; —'I say to you, Messer Conte, as I once said to my kinsman, the Marquis of Este, hazard is the one thing that gives to life its savor!'"

I began to think I had chosen far from wisely when I selected Castel Arlio as a refuge for Alfrieda. But the thing was done, and naught remained but to make the best of it, and to hope for the speedy coming of Azzo Novello and his force.

"There is a favor that I would ask of you, Messer di Luggio," said I.

"You have but to name it," he returned.

"That my room and the one occupied by my friend and follower, Berthold, be changed to the corridor upon which the apartments of Madonna Deslemaini open."

"A wise provision that shall be at once arranged for," declared the count. "It would be to me a source of never-ending regret if aught befell the

lovely lady here where I command. This whole matter may be born out of the mist of my imagination, may grow out of my unaccountable dislike of Da Feltre, but some slight precautions against possible danger will do no harm."

After a few more words we descended to the courtyard where I encountered Berthold with whom I paused to witness the daily noonday parade of the garrison forces. They were a fine appearing body of men, these troopers of Este, and I noticed that Da Feltre, who was conducting their manuevers, handled them after the manner of a master.

"What think you, my friend," I said to Berthold, " of the small-statured officer yonder?"

" The dwarf?" returned he, pursing his lips, and giving his head a peculiar sidelong twist, as he was wont to do when seriously considering a subject. " He knows his trade, but I would rather be fighting against him than with him, though I doubt not I should find him a tough adversary."

I then told the trusty Suabian of my conversation with Di Luggio.

" We will watch, you and I," said Berthold, " and if there is any deviltry afoot Messer Osimo the Dwarf will have to play his game cleverly if he thinks to win."

The next morning word was brought to Arlio by special messenger that the Marquis of Este would be delayed a week in his coming. Alfrieda took the news gaily, but I was troubled with heavy forebodings which I was at pains not to show when in her company.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PLOT OF OSIMO THE DWARF

Three of the days before the expected arrival of the Marquis Azzo Novello of Este had slipped by, and it was the afternoon of the fourth. Scarcely a ripple had stirred the serenity of life at Arlio, but there had been undercurrents. Twice, so Di Luggio had reported to me, Da Feltre had absented himself from the fortress under the pretext of making a personal reconnoissance of one of the side valleys, now openly averring that before leaving Ferrara he had been empowered to act upon his own responsibility by the Marquis.

"Were it not for his intimate connection with my commander-in-chief," the count had declared, in conclusion, "I should place the man in confinement, but under the circumstances I dare not, and he knows it, and is chuckling to himself behind my back."

"You can do nothing, so far as I can see, but watch with redoubled vigilance," said I. "Either Berthold or myself has warded our corridor throughout the night, as you are aware, and we will continue to keep guard."

Possibly an hour after this conversation, I chanced to find Alfrieda alone upon the terrace. It was extremely rare that I had her to myself, for either Di Luggio or his lieutenant was gener-

ally in attendance, and I inwardly hailed this opportunity for a talk with her delightedly.

I must have shown the pleasure I felt, for at the outset she was inclined to banter me on my radiancy of bearing. Not a word had been breathed to her of Di Luggio's suspicions, nor was she aware of the vigils which Berthold and I so rigorously kept, so her natural light-heartedness had, in some measure, re-asserted itself, and I was surprised after her preliminary chaffing that she should fall suddenly grave, and fix her eyes musingly on the distance.

In the years long gone two olive trees had been planted on the terrace in a spot where, in a cleft of the rock, there had been a gradual accumulation of soil. These trees had flourished, and now made a pleasant shade against the afternoon heats. A bench had been placed beneath them, stretching from gnarled trunk to trunk, and upon this we were seated.

"Kinsman Tiso," said Alfrieda at length, ceasing her contemplation of the remote slopes beyond the intervening gorge, "there is something I would fain confide to you, but, ere I do so, I would ask of you a promise."

"'Tis given," said I, without considering what the maid might have to tell me.

"It is a promise that you will curb your anger, and not act hastily or rashly, when you have heard what I shall say."

I gazed at her in wonder. What strange rev-

elation was she about to make? I expect my jaw set, for she spoke mildly, smiling a little wistfully the while.

"I shall have to remind you, perhaps, that you have promised."

What could I do but smile back at her!

"I will do my best to keep my word," I pledged, "yet I am but human, and have been known to give way to anger, when provoked."

She meditated an instant, and then began.

"There is a man here whom I have come to distrust and fear."

I was on the point of naming him, but checked myself with a suppressed—

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, and before to-day, although I realized that he was repugnant to me, I had no real grounds for distrusting or disliking him, but now, since this morning—"

"Has this person offered you some insult?" I cried, springing up, my brow contracted and my hands clenched.

"I see that I shall indeed have to remind you of your promise," said she.

I resumed my seat.

"You were saying?—"

"That since this morning I have come to the conclusion that Messer Osimo da Feltre is involved in, in truth may be the leader in, some dark plot. Until to-day I have given little heed to his subtle flattery which he has continually poured into my

ears, attributing it to the man's natural attitude toward women. A few hours ago he changed his tactics, and grew boldly outspoken. He begged me to take him for a protector instead of you, saying that he had the power to be of real aid to me, while you were but a person of broken family, without position and without influence."

With both hands she grasped one of my arms as she saw I was likely to give way to passion.

"Hear me! hear me, I beg of you!" she besought. "You are doing the very thing I believe he desires to bring about. You are losing your self-control. Do you suppose I would speak of so intimate, so delicate a matter to you, were I not persuaded that it is the aim of this Da Feltre to force you into a quarrel, and somehow kill you? A remark he let fall later, when I scorned his proposal, caused me to think this. He counted on me to tell you his proposition believing this would arouse your wrath, and lead to the desired result. I have told you, but it is to warn you against being drawn into a difference with him on any score whatever Again I would remind you of your promise, kinsman Tiso."

"Was it won from me quite fairly, Madonna?" I answered. "Assuredly if I am openly affronted by this man, you would not have me play the part of a poltroon!"

"If I know you to be no coward, and if you yourself are conscious of your bravery, would you allow a despicable villain to lure you into a personal conflict to suit his own black ends?"

"But if all this is imaginary?"

"It is not imaginary!"—and there was intense conviction in her voice—"my woman's heart tells me—"

She stopped abruptly.

"Your promise!" she said, beneath her breath.

Glancing toward the steps by which the terrace was gained, I caught a glimpse betwixt the olive boughs of Osimo da Feltre slowly descending.

"If aught should happen to you, what of me?" she added, as I hesitated.

And yet I felt, deep in my soul, that it was not of herself she was thinking so much as of my safety.

"You have my promise," this in an undertone as we rose together. "Make some excuse, if you can, and let us leave."

If I was to refrain from taking this wretch by the throat her woman's wit must remove me to a spot where the temptation was not so overpowering. Yet I perceived at once that avoidance of him was to be no simple matter. He had planted himself at the foot of the rock-cut steps, and was awaiting our approach with his insinuating smile.

"I hope," he said, and it was as bare-faced an insult as was ever breathed, "that I am not frightening our turtle-doves from their nest."

Alfrieda met the contemptible speech calmly, while I dug my nails into my palms and set my teeth hard, a very hell of fire within.

"I have asked Messer Camposanpiero to accom-

pany me to a place where we will not be interrupted, as I desire to confer with him concerning a matter of importance," and she moved toward the creature as though she would brush him like a fly from her path.

He hesitated for a second, then I believe it occurred to him that she might be taking me somewhere to communicate to me his proposal, and so he stepped to one side. Alfrieda walked by him with as much indifference as she would have passed a pillar of stone, and as for myself I did not dare so much as let my glance waver toward him lest I should catch the shadow of some maddening look upon his face, and fling caution and my pledged word to the four winds. And so we trod the courtyard together and ascended the main staircase, at the head of which I left her.

"You will avoid him?" she said, as we were parting.

"I will do so on every possible occasion. Had I best tell Di Luggio? He already distrusts him."

"It might be well to, and yet, upon a second thought, it would be likely to make trouble for him with the Marquis should he have any difference with Da Feltre. I shall hereafter keep closely to my room save at meal hours, when he cannot annoy me, and if you can manage to have no converse with him, then, on the whole, silence may be the wiser course. We shall be leaving erelong, I trust."

As evening fell clouds gathered and closed about Arlio and the adjacent crests. Darkness shut in early, and the night promised to be one of unbroken gloom. The castle grew quiet before the wonted hour. No one save those on duty seemed disposed to linger in the court or guard room. I had declined an invitation from Di Luggio to join him at chess in his apartment, excusing myself on the plea of dulness, and sat with Berthold by the small window of his chamber (his sleeping place and mine adjoined) which by daylight commanded a view toward the east. Even to him I had said nothing of the afternoon's occurrence upon the terrace, and there was silence for a long space between us, each busy with his own thoughts.

"It's a grewsome night," declared the old soldier presently, pausing as he burnished his sword, and eying the impenetrable void without with a shake of his head.

"It would be a sage precaution, I think, were we both to be on guard after midnight," said I. "Should there be any treachery contemplated here at Arlio there could be no fitter time than these unhallowed hours for its execution."

It was then hard upon ten. Having each rested for a space in turn, when we heard the clank of the changing watch in the courtyard at twelve, we stole out into the corridor and closed our respective doors. Previously we had divided the night between us, pacing from the head of the

main stairway to that of a narrow descent to the gallery bending toward the south-western postern, this descent being reached around an elbow in the corridor. Between these points, and not very far from our own rooms, were the connecting apartments occupied by Alfrieda and Grisanta, and between these points also, just at the corridor elbow, was a winding stairway leading to the floor above. It was these stairways, connecting at unexpected intervals one floor with another in both the north and south corridors, that gave me the greatest feeling of insecurity, for I realized how easy it would be for a stealthy-footed prowler to slip about in the vast maze of stone, and catch even the most alert watcher unaware.

I gave Berthold the shortest sentry duty, the space between the main stairway head and Alfrieda's door; for myself I reserved the other portion of the corridor communicating with the south-western postern. In two iron brackets, long disused, we stuck torches which we occasionally replenished, and while they by no means dissipated the gloom of the lonely passages, they at least rendered it less oppressive.

Had each of us restricted his beat it might have been wiser, and yet who can say that the outcome would have been different, or, indeed, as fortunate? We were contending with an ingenuity the subtlety of which we did not yet fully realize.

It was perhaps two hours ere the first faint presage of dawn, that period of the night when the

currents of life run lowest, and sleep lays its heaviest grip upon the bodily powers. I had left the postern stair, and was nearing the corridor elbow, when a hoarse cry rang down the vaulted passage, and my name was thrice repeated. It was Berthold calling.

Like a bolt ejected from a cross-bow I made a spring. I cleared the corner, and distinguished the massive bulk of my companion watcher, torch in hand, before me at the nearer end of his beat.

"What is it? For God's sake, what is it?" I cried, as I ran toward him.

"See!" he ejaculated, pointing with the flambeau, as I gained his side, "see!"

A door, not that of Alfrieda's room, nor of Grisanta's, but of the apartment adjoining, was ajar.

"I touched it by accident just now in passing, and it swung back!" exclaimed Berthold. "Look! the fastenings have been tampered with!"

I did not wait to examine them, but seizing the torch from his hand I leaped within, sick with a chill dread. Yes, it was as I had anticipated, the room connected with that next it, Grisanta's, and the door between the two was open.

"Tricked! duped!" I groaned, as I plunged into the woman's apartment.

On her bed the poor creature lay, breathing heavily under the influence of some potent drug. It must have been deftly administered, for no sign of a struggle was apparent. And Alfrieda's room!—empty, with the bed-coverings half

dragged upon the floor, an overturned chair, and several articles of apparel close beside it!

"A thousand furies!" I cried, gritting my teeth impotently, and gazing distraught at Berthold standing before me.

"Come!" he commanded, grasping my arm, and fairly hauling me forth into the corridor by the route we had pursued on entering. "The woman there will get her senses soon enough. We may not be too late. Something tells me all this has just happened!"

"It is Osimo's work," said I, "and he must have made use of the stairway to the floor above, there at the corridor's elbow. If he is still in the castle it will be by the northern postern he will try to flee, not by the one I was watching!"

"To the north postern, then!" exclaimed Berthold, and just as we started for the main staircase, from somewhere in the distance, faint and far, yet penetrating, clear and unmistakable, shrilled out a woman's scream.

And I pealed forth in answer an exultant cry of joy, for I knew that we were in truth not too late.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE CASTLE TERRACE

Four bounds took me down the main staircase, a feat which I never could execute again without grievous damage to my bones, for in one hand I grasped the torch, and in the other my naked sword. Two drowsy guards were leaning against the wall in the great arched castle entrance, and a lively fright I gave them by my cry, for it was suddenly borne in upon me that this attempted abduction by Osimo might be part of a plan to surprise the castle.

"Follow!" I called to them, "follow!" and I was away diagonally across the court where an archway from the arcade gave access to the lower northern gallery and postern. Behind me they raced in full shout, and after them panted Berthold.

From somewhere above I felt certain that Osimo was descending swiftly with his precious burden. Whence would he come? Almost opposite the very archway toward which I was speeding was a staircase. That was the shortest route, and fear that Alfrieda's cry might have been heard would lead him to choose it.

Unencumbered by any harness whatsoever, I did not realize that my feet touched the stones of the court as I ran, yet the pace was not so fleet as my desire. A strong current of air nearly

quenched my flambeau as I gained the arcade, telling me that the postern was open. Had Osimo a confederate? I did not pause to consider. Into the gallery I dashed, raising my torch on high. A man stood at the postern, seemingly one of the castle guards. He scanned my face an instant, and then leaped at me like a mountain cat. I met him. Steel rang once against steel. My blade slid along his like a snake. A quick wrench turned his weapon aside, and then—well, he crumpled up on the gallery flagging like a piece of flame-sered parchment. I wheeled, and there was Da Feltre, and there, too, were the guards who had followed me.

"Seize him!" I shouted. "He is a traitor, and would betray the castle!"

They paused, doubtful what action to take, and their hesitation was the salvation of the dwarf. He pealed out the battle-cry of the Romanesi, and hurled himself upon me like a catapault. Withstand that furious onslaught I could not, and was forced to give ground. Never had I seen a sword wielded as he plied his. I considered myself a master of fence, and while I may have been the equal and possibly the superior of Da Feltre in some particulars, in the contracted space where we faced each other I was no match for his infinitely rapid play. Then Berthold roared in upon us with a furious oath at the supine guards.

I had backed beyond the open postern, and at the sound of the Suabian's angry objurgations

the dwarf desisted from his attack upon me, and, ere any one could intervene, with a terse and taunting "we shall meet again, my lover!" plunged forth into the night.

"Shut the postern!" I shouted, "shut the postern!" nor was the action taken an instant too soon, for as the bolts and chains rattled into place there was a tremendous impact upon the seasoned barrier of oak and iron as a beam was driven against it from without.

It was quite as it had been given me to see in my descent of the main staircase. Abduction and attack had been carefully planned, were, in fact, to be coincident. All along Osimo had been in communication with the forces of one of Ezzelino's lieutenants, and when he found that I was not to be drawn into a quarrel and disposed of ere the blow was struck, he hastened the consummation of his plot. Aided by his sole confederate within the walls, he had slain Di Luggio's trusty guard, and only the veriest chance had foiled his clever machinations.

While the impotent blows were yet resounding on the stout postern door, I dropped my sword, and still clutching the flambeau, for others now came tossing across the court, I swarmed up the stairs which Da Feltre had descended. As I reached the top, and started to follow the corridor eastward, out of the darkness emerged a loose-robed figure,—Alfrieda, feebly feeling her way along the wall!

"Thank God!" I cried, "thank God!" and then she staggered forward, and cast herself sobbing on my breast.

* * * * *

It was late in the afternoon of the next day, and we were sitting, Alfrieda and I, upon the bench beneath the olive trees on the southern terrace. From far below came up the rhythmic ripple of running water. Across the precipitous vale, from the gentler further slopes that the olives silvered, drifted the mellow cadence of bird-song. It was all so lovely and peaceful that we gave no heed to the solitary figure sitting erect upon his horse where the road to the south topped the distant crest, a figure above whose head floated the pennon of the Romanesi.

It was our first meeting since that fateful early morning hour, and though as yet few words had been spoken, a great happiness lay between us. The beauty of the tranquil golden sky enfolded us like a blessing. The deep sorrow, the anxious stress of the past, were, for the time being, lifted from our spirits. Again the world was good and life a boon.

"And do you feel that you can tell me now," I said, "what you recall of your dreadful experience? Then we will try to banish it from our minds."

She gave a little shudder, but the sense of security which enveloped her lent her assurance, and she nodded with a grave smile of assent.

"Berthold and I," I commented, "have vainly cudgeled our brains to make out how that contemptible creature twice eluded us as he did. Of course the door fastenings must have been loosened at some earlier time. All was in readiness for the attempt. But the success which he achieved must have been the result of almost superhuman agility."

"He possesses it, I believe," declared Alfrieda, "and like the cat kind he must be able to see in the dark. I was roused from a deep sleep," she continued, "by a painful sensation of suffocation, and was conscious that some one was endeavoring to make me swallow an evil tasting potion. Struggling in the grasp of a pair of powerful hands, unable to distinguish anything in the enveloping blackness, I almost at once felt the lethargic effect of what little of the drug had found its way down my throat. I can remember thinking that it was useless to resist. Then a garment was wrapped about me, and I was lifted and borne away. There was a strong rush of air upon my face when I again became conscious. It must have been this, I imagine, that caused me to regain my senses. Then for the first time it came to me that I was in the arms of Osimo da Feltre, and I screamed."

"It was then that we heard you," said I.

"He did not give me another chance to cry out," Alfrieda went on, "for his palm closed over my mouth like a vise, and he hurried along like a mad thing, cursing me fiercely. You see he had been

deceived, believing I had swallowed all the drug as he had intended I should. At length having paused as least twice in his desperate flight to listen, he cast me from him with a hideous imprecation, and I had just recovered from the shock of the fall, and was moving in the direction of the medley of sounds which echoed up from below when you appeared at the stair-head."

Then recollecting perhaps the impulse of thankfulness that had caused her to cast herself into my arms, she blushed—blushed celestially, shall I say? At least I never before appreciated the full divinity of a blush in a woman.

"I am very sure," she remarked, with a touch of coyness, "that I should have had a hearty greeting for any rescuer at that moment."

But I was not cast down at the implication that another would have received the same spontaneous welcome that had been given me.

"The Comte di Luggio, for instance?" I suggested playfully.

"He is a proper gentleman," she remarked, "and yet——"

"And yet," I repeated.

But she would go no further.

Though I was sure of myself, gentles, and, better far than that, sure of her fond heart, her pure soul, the wonderful rapture of that hour thrills me to this day when I think upon it. How eloquent I grew as though inspired by some nameless influence! Speech? I was not dumb, as I have

heard some are under similar circumstances. Nay, words flowed from my lips as a torrent flows from a living well in a rock! I laid my life before her. I bared the past. I drew a picture of the future. I was like a painter, enamored of the vision which he is portraying, and I could see how the play of my fancy pleased her. Smiles hovered constantly about her mouth as I went on, as white doves about a cote. I knew she was won, and she realized that I had the knowledge of her love, and was happy. Her eyes dwelt upon mine; then I had her in my arms, and much closer I held her to my breast than I had dared in the corridor above the northern postern.

"Tiso," she said, presently, "I have ever dreamed of a wooer like to thee!"

"Sweeting," said I, in return, "never have I dreamed of a maid like thee, for thou art sweeter than any dream."

And so till the sun drooped, aye, and after, it was this amorous give and take of lovers. Then it was that I spoke of the fate of her family, and was able to comfort her in her sorrow. Later we went into the banquet-hall where dinner was nightly spread, although the board was sparsely supplied, owing to the exigencies of warfare. There must have been that in our faces which told our story, for Di Luggio came gallantly to meet us with his cordial compliments, and Berthold with his bluff and hearty good wishes.

Again upon the following afternoon we sat on

the terrace together, and as an interval of blissful silence succeeded an interchange of tender confidences, my sight chanced to return to earth after a journey through the realms of happy fancy. The distant horseman, he of the day before, became, on a sudden, animate, resolving himself into rapid action. He was no longer a statue flying a pennon of the Romanesi. Down the winding road into the valley below us he frantically roweled his steed. We rose, drew to the terrace-edge, and watched him disappear around a buttress of rock.

Alfrieda looked at me questioningly.

"Ah," I exclaimed, "that explains it!" and I pointed to the post of outlook whence the horseman had spurred.

It was a brave spectacle upon which shone the westering light. Line upon line, in full armor, marched a glittering cavalcade, above which, splendid with colors as rich as the sunset, the banners of the House of Este floated on the breeze.

CHAPTER XIX

THE AFFAIR OF PONTE LUNGO

One hundred—two hundred—three hundred men, plumes tossing, mail glistening, horses curvetting, and a herald with trumpet of burnished silver to give tidings of their approach! And then the answering cheers from the quickly gathered groups upon the battlements! It had been an anxious time for these sturdy soldiers of the garrison,—days and nights of unceasing watchfulness, fleet and far outridings in the darkness, hard blows given and received and withal scant fare to sustain body and spirit. They were proud of what they had done, faithful in almost every instance to the cause they served, yet they were unfeignedly glad to behold this armament of their lord coming to their relief.

They packed the great castle court, these men of Este, row ranged on row, all at attention, and I had little wonder that the Marquis Azzo Novello, the sixth of that name, surveyed them with a touch of pride. Yet he was not a vain man, a trifle pompous may be, ruddy, and inclined to corpulence, but graciousness itself when in conversation, with a heart as kind as that of his ancient foe, he of Romano, was malevolent.

When all had heard the news he brought,—how out of policy, owing to weighty projects that were on foot, the castle was to be abandoned,—and when

the troops had been quartered, some in a bivouac just without the castle, for the stronghold, although spacious, would not contain the entire train, then it was that Di Luggio presented Alfrieda and myself to his commander, with brief explanation of the reason for our presence at Arlio.

Reception more kindly could not have been accorded us. Our families he knew; my tragic misfortunes had reached his ears, and of Alfrieda's he was not surprised to learn.

"Ferrara will welcome you both," he said, "you, Madonna, at the palace of your relatives; you, Messere, at our court."

When told of the treachery of his wife's kinsman the saneness of his character was revealed. He did not, as Ezzelino would have done upon the receipt of such unpleasant news, fall into a black rage and vent his wrath upon some innocent person near him, but with a grave shake of his head, and a sad look about his mobile mouth, said,—

"It will be his loss in the end. I harbored and trusted him for my wife's sake, despite his evil reputation, but I am not greatly surprised at the result. Indeed I believe I have every reason to be thankful that he is now where whatever harm he does will have to be wrought openly. He cannot at least betray me in my own house."

"Can he not still work in the dark?" I suggested. "I have a presage that I, at least, have not seen the last of him."

"I earnestly pray you have, as I trust I have," said the Marquis, and with that Da Feltre was dismissed.

All the ensuing day there was much bustle in the castle preparatory to the proposed evacuation. Alfrieda and I roamed about much together, viewing with interest everything that was going forward, and when it came to the departure hour it was between Berthold and myself that the dear maiden rode down into the valley and up the winding ascent from the crest of which we were to look for the last time upon Arlio. And as we drew rein, and regarded the magnificent fortress standing out so grandly in the full flood of the morning light, my heart went out to it, especially to that part of it which seemed like a garden hanging from the side of the southern battlements.

"Should I never behold the spot again," I said, gazing into the lovely depths of Alfrieda's eyes, "the terrace yonder will ever have a fond place in my affections, for there I learned how much of joy life can contain."

"We will cherish the place together, Tiso mio," answered she, with her rare smile. "What it is to you, even so is it to me."

Very delightful it was to ride under the autumn sky companioned by love. In the vineyards that climbed many of the hillsides men and women were busy at the purple harvest. Here there were drooping fig boughs, heavy with fruit; there the apricot showed the fervor of its cheek. All the

widening sweep of land revealed the gold and bronze touch of the ripening season. Soon through an opening in the hills we descried the gleam of far off waters where the Adige and the Po stole through the rich levels of the lowlands to the sea. And then, as we began to descend, another gap in the declivities gave us a glimpse of the pinnacled battlements and towers of Montagnana that seemed to swim and sway in an ocean of amber haze.

The road which we were traversing took us about half way between the last named town and the ancestral seat of the Marquis, now in the possession of Ezzelino. As we wound downward it entered the active brain of his Lordship that a display of arms before Este, upon a certain wide strip of meadow without the walls, might prove an agreeable diversion, knowing the citizens to be friendly, and realizing that no force which the Lord of Romano might have stationed in the town would venture forth to give battle to so formidable a body of light-riding men-at-arms as composed his following. Accordingly he detached Di Luggio and twenty gray riders to escort Alfrieda and myself, and with the remainder of his armament trotted blithely away upon his adventurous expedition. With some this digression might have appeared like an act of bravado, but with him it was nothing more than a martial jest, a caprice of the hour.

"Doubtless we shall reach Ferrara hard upon

your heels," he shouted to Di Luggio, with a wave of farewell, "or should you chance to take siesta at Ponte Lungo, haply we may overtake you there and continue together."

Il Ponte Lungo was what remained of a once noble Roman bridge spanning the Adige at a spot where the river was wide and shallow, and despite its ruinous and well-nigh impassible condition, it was still used to a considerable extent by travelers journeying northward from Ferrara, especially those not making Padua an objective point. It was high noon when we drew in sight of the ancient structure, an unobscured sun flaming fiercely in a lifeless heaven, and we all hailed with delight the willow and poplar shade which we beheld on the southern bank of the stream.

"What say you to tarrying yonder till his Lordship comes up?" suggested Di Luggio to Alfrieda and myself, as we began taking our way in single file along the still stable arches above the yellow flood.

"It would be agreeable to us, I am sure," returned Alfrieda, "if you think there is no danger of an attack from any roving band of Ezzelino's forces."

"Personally I regard it as perfectly safe," said Di Luggio, "or I certainly would not suggest it, and the Marquis must also have done so, or he would hardly have mentioned it as he did."

It was in this wise decided that we should halt beneath the poplars and willows on the banks of

the Adige, just by the southern approach to the old bridge, and very agreeable it was to recline upon the sward, hearken to the drowsy mid-day gurgle of the seaward-lazing river, and partake of the hardy soldiers' fare which the troopers produced from their saddle-bags.

The horses were tethered, the men put aside their heavy armor, and when their hunger as well as ours had been appeased, there were friendly bouts at wrestling, as well as other trials of skill, for our entertainment. After the tension and rigid discipline of Arlio, this relaxation, duly sanctioned by Di Luggio, was very welcome to those of the gray riders who were acting as our escort, and they entered into whatever was proposed by any one of their number with enthusiastic abandon.

Although Alfrieda and I were interested in the games of the troopers, we hailed the time when, after the sports had been concluded, we could stroll apart and rest together upon a gigantic willow root which formed a natural seat a few feet from where the bank dipped sharply to the stream. Here, hand clasped in hand, we took no heed of how the moments flew. We had escaped out of the very mouth of the pit which had engulfed our kin, and although the shadow of a great sorrow was still dark upon us, yet with our love and our youth, and our hope for the future, it is not to be wondered that we found life fair.

We spoke of casual things, each realizing in the

presence of the other the height of happiness. There was a boy fishing in the shadow of one of the half crumbled arches upon the opposite shore who engaged our attention for a time; then it was a hawk, now poising in mid air, a black speck upon the intense golden blue of the sky, and now descending like an arrow to seize its prey; again it was a boatman pulling with long, languid sweep against the current which was tossed up like little drops of liquid amber from his prow.

Following the progress of this oarsman, we noted, after the lapse of a considerable number of moments, just as he was approaching a wide bend in the river above us, that he hung upon his oars, and began scrutinizing the southern shore of the stream.

"What can that man see?" queried Alfrieda, endeavoring to pick out the point in the skirting foliage upon which the waterman's gaze was directed.

Trees and underbrush lined the southern bank of the Adige as far as it was visible, with scarcely a break in the thick covert. At one spot, and it appeared to be the very place upon which the oarsman's eyes were fixed, the leafage gave way to a dense mass of lofty reeds. Watching them intently, I fancied that I could detect a peculiar wavering among them, again and yet again.

"They are tall enough to conceal a squad of horsemen if they leaned low in their saddles," said I, voicing without intending to do so, the thought that rose in my mind.

"Horsemen!" exclaimed Alfrieda, with a suggestion of apprehension in her tone, "what horsemen, pray, could be riding yonder?"

"True enough!" I answered, "what horsemen indeed! And look, our man with the oars has had his curiosity satisfied, for he is pulling away in his sluggish manner again! He may be a hunter, for aught we know, and the disturbance yonder may have been caused by some deer which he caught sight of, and paused to observe, thinking to return erelong and fill an empty larder."

Thus I endeavored to put the thing from Alfrieda's mind and my own, but somehow I grew uneasy. In the direction of the road there was no undergrowth, but to the south and west the low shrubbery extended to within perhaps twenty paces of where we were encamped. I glanced at the gray riders. They lay stretched about in several groups, laughing and chatting, wholly unprepared for any sudden onset. Apart, and toward the road, Di Luggio and Berthold were striding up and down, gossiping together. Four troopers were in charge of the horses, but they appeared listless and drowsy.

I started up with a swiftly formed determination, and instinctively Alfrieda rose with me.

"You may think me old womanish, my love," I began, "but——"

The sentence was never completed. A carelessly bent-back bough revealed to me in the underbrush an evil face beneath a soldier's helmet.

"Quick, men!" I shouted. "Your arms! Look to the bush yonder!" and, as I hastened to conduct Alfrieda to a place of greater safety, I indicated the spot where I had detected the malignant countenance.

Chance! fortune! fate!—call it what you will —it was this that saved us from capture, and our escort from slaughter probably to the last man. The snare had not been fully set, for when two score of as ruffianly a pack of free blades as ever struck a foul blow broke from the woods about us two or three minutes later, we were in a measure prepared for them. And who most fittingly should be in command but Osimo da Feltre!

How he had managed to collect such a scurvy company of rascals, and thus contrive cunningly to waylay us was entirely a matter of conjecture. From some point of vantage, either he himself, or a spy in his employ, must have witnessed the departure of the Marquis Azzo toward Este, after which the arch villain had laid his plans, but happily a benignant providence had intervened, and at the crucial moment guided my sight.

Forming in a semi-circle, we retreated upon the approach to the bridge, a causeway where not more than half a dozen men could face each other. Here, despite their superior number, Da Feltre's followers had us at but small disadvantage. True we were compelled to abandon most of the horses, but upon one of the few we did succeed in rescuing, a messenger was dispatched with desperate

haste to bid the Marquis, who, we trusted, could not be far away, hasten to our aid.

" 'Tis all my fault," groaned Di Luggio, who by my side, with Berthold on his left, was resisting the furious efforts of Da Feltre and his band of underlings to penetrate our ranks.

"Do not be so cast down!" I cried. "This attack can avail nothing. We can hold this bridge till nightfall, if need be!"

"I might at least have thrown out sentries," lamented Di Luggio.

"And had them slain," said I, "while as it is we have not lost a man, nor are we likely to."

Forsooth, we had now fallen back upon a position where the swords of Di Luggio, Berthold, one other and myself formed practically a wall of steel against which our assailants hurled themselves in vain, however much Da Feltre raged, and led the attack upon us. I crossed blades with the villain for an instant, and in this case it was not as it had been at the Arlio postern, for I had the satisfaction of touching him upon the shoulder with a pretty thrust which I had mastered in the East.

Then there mounted a great burst of cheering behind us, with cries of "Este! Este!" whereat our adversaries precipitately turned tail and fled, some of our company, with derisive yells, pursuing them into the underbrush where all our horses were re-captured. Alfrieda glided up and hung upon my arm with pride and joy, so that I gave no thought to Osimo da Feltre glowering at us

and the smiling Marquis, ere, with a gesture of menace, he plunged into the intricacies of the tangled covert.

"Bear up, man!" cried the Marquis to his captain, after greetings had been exchanged and explanations given, Di Luggio still being downcast. "'Twas I who suggested the siesta at Ponte Lungo! I shoulder the whole blame. I failed to take into account the cunning and the boldness of the cousin of La Donna Marchesa. This fine gentleman may one day over-reach himself, and when he does,——" the quick motion with his hand which the Marquis made was more expressive than a volume of words.

Berthold, standing by, uttered no articulate sound, but muttered hoarsely in his throat.

Gaiety followed hard upon the heels of what might have been tragedy, and so we rode blithely on towards Ferrara, I smiling into Alfrieda's eyes, and she into mine.

CHAPTER XX

WHAT HAPPENED AT FERRARA

In the street of Santa Maria della Rosa, not far from the church of that name, stood the Palazzo Deslemaini, gray, stately and forbidding. The memory of it to this hour fills me with a repugnance that is akin to horror. The street was a small thoroughfare, and the palace dominated it, chilled it so I came to feel, and made it even more insignificant than it really was.

When I left Alfrieda at the door of the Palazzo Deslemaini in the hands of her relatives, and went to seek out some lodgings which Di Luggio in his kindness assured me I would find comfortable (Berthold accompanying me), I was, in so far as the sorrowful experiences through which I had passed would permit me to be, a happy man. In less than a week I was miserable.

In the Palazzo Deslemaini dwelt the brothers Arnaldo and Giacomo, the former a man of affairs, married and childless, the latter a scholarly recluse, unmarried. These men were the cousins of Alfrieda's father. Arnaldo Deslemaini gave me the impression of being bloodless. Tall, thin, slightly stooping, gray-eyed and sparse of hair, he was suspicious, calculating and cold. His wife, Angelica, most unfittingly named, was his precise counterpart. Giacomo Deslemaini was of a markedly different nature, yet his long years of seclu-

sion had renderd him shy, reserved, and constrained.

Such was the society into which Alfrieda, she who was naturally all sunshine and blithesomeness, was thrown. It was like condemning a flower, a sweet thing that longed for the free airs of heaven, to perpetual gloom. And I whom she had grown to love with the same single-heartedness with which I loved her was made clearly to understand at the close of my second visit, parting from Arnaldo Deslemaini at the street door, that my presence beneath the roof of the Deslemaini was not welcome. The relationship between the two families through my mother was ignored, and it was in no wise indirectly hinted that the son of a broken house was no match for one who was likely to be the heir of one of the wealthiest nobles of Ferrara.

Directly afterward, in the only interview which I ever had alone with Alfrieda in the Palazzo Deslemaini (an interview that was purely a blessed chance), I told her these things; and had it been practicable to seek Fra Salimbene's niece, or indeed any other refuge, she would have quitted her kinsfolk that very hour. Could I have provided her with fit shelter, I would have besought her to hasten to a priest with me, and she would have gone. But, alas, there was much grievous truth in Arnaldo Deslemaini's remark! I *was* the son of a broken house, and until I retrieved my fortunes I could not claim Alfrieda as mine. Ere I left her, however, she extracted a promise from me that I

would come to her once a week; such a privilege, she declared, she would insist upon. And we agreed that we would write each other,—love would find a way. Forsooth, love speedily did, for Alfrieda's charm and goodness so won the affections of one of the Deslemaini serving-women that she would have traveled to the ends of the known earth for the sweet maiden.

It was this trusty attendant (for Grisanta had been peremptorily dismissed) who frequently left affectionate missives at my door, and bore back with her tokens of my unceasing devotion.

The autumn wore away, and winter came,—winter, with its sharp changes, its bitter winds, a sad time for the poor who were not infrequently to be seen crouching throughout the night about bonfires kindled in the piazzas, for the season was most severe, and fuel scarce.

Directly after my arrival in Ferrara I had presented my letter from Fra Salimbene to the papal legate, Filippo Fontenase, Archbishop of Ravenna, and had been assured by him that a command for me would be forthcoming when the forces of the leaguer gathered. Weekly, in all the churches in Ferrara, then twice, and finally thrice a week, was Ezzelino da Romano denounced, and indulgences promised to any who would join in the movement against him.

I was much at the court of the Marquis Azzo where there was talk of little but the crusade. The Count of San Bonifacio came and went; emissaries

from Bologna and Venice arrived, were closeted with the Marquis and his advisers, and departed; yet the time for the concentration of the allies kept being postponed. In the meanwhile my carefully hoarded resources, at first considerable, began to grow slender, and the situation as regards Alfrieda and myself was such as to wear my patience threadbare.

Repair to the Palazzo Deslemaini each week I did, always to be received with the same frigidity by Messer Arnaldo and his wife, who remained in the room during my call, exchanging occasional comments, but never addressing themselves either to Alfrieda or myself. Giacomo was rarely present. When he was, the atmosphere was a trifle less icy, for he had a warm heart beneath his shell of reserve, and had begun to cherish for my beloved a real affection. He even exchanged a word now and again with me upon the street, and finally, discovering that I had some bookish leanings, became quite friendly, dropping in occasionally at my rooms to show me a missal, or an ancient manuscript which he had contrived to procure.

To add to my discomfiture, it began to be whispered about at court that Messer and Donna Arnaldo Deslemaini were inclined to favor the attentions of Messer Matteo Ticini, a merchant prince of Ferrara, to their cousin. This man was a widower who bore a very objectionable reputation, and it was very easy for me to imagine how repugnant his advances would be to Alfrieda. Yet

she was practically powerless to resent them, and I must perforce stand by and bear it all in moody silence.

Then there came a rift in the enveloping gloom. Fra Salimbene appeared. We met one day in the Piazza della Pace, and embraced like brothers. While the friar had been apprised of Alfrieda's safety and mine, and I had learned of his fortunate escape from the bogs of Battaglia, and subsequent mission south as far as Rome, we had a deal to say to each other, and spent many hours in pleasant converse in my apartments. It was a great relief to me to unburden my troubles to an old friend, and the friar's lofty and courageous spirit was as a staff to lean upon. A little later he contrived to speak with Alfrieda alone, and his counsel of patience and forbearance was a great support to her as well as to me.

Although he offered to conduct her to the convent of which his niece was an inmate, he advised her against leaving her relatives, and by this advice she finally decided to abide.

The chill weather broke suddenly, and the wide wave of greenery that engirdled Ferrara was a signal for the gathering of the hosts. Fra Salimbene managed to arrange a loan for me; Giacomo Deslemaini, to whom I introduced my friend, conceived a great liking for him, and became increasingly cordial, and the command of five hundred papal recruits under the direct supervision of the Legate, who was more of a soldier than a

prelate, was assigned to me, so my star appeared to be in the ascendant. Then the blow fell, unforeseen in its swiftness, dire and crushing in its results.

Toward evening on a mild day of the first week in March I was returning with Berthold, for whom I had obtained a petty office, from the parade-ground which lay just within the walls in the south-easterly quarter of the city. Here I had been drilling my command in certain new evolutions. On entering the street in which my lodgings were situated, I descried Giacomo Deslemaini standing before my door. There was nothing remarkable in this fact, for he had fallen into the habit of dropping in at my rooms, when he took the air, for a chat with me or with Fra Salimbene who was accustomed to come and go at his will, he having a sleeping apartment but two houses away.

I greeted my guest heartily as I drew near, and at my invitation he followed me within. Slightly stooping and thin, like Arnaldo, Giacomo Deslemaini resembled his brother in no other particular. There was an appealing, almost pathetic expression in his eyes of deep brown, and his smile, when once you chanced to see it, was very engaging. Formal he always was, despite the greater familiarity and friendliness existing between us, but this punctilious and grave demeanor was something he could not divest from himself.

"Messer Camposanpiero," said he, pausing in the middle of the room into which I ushered him,

and leaning rather heavily on the tall cane he always carried, "I have never talked with you concerning your experiences during the time while you were conducting my cousin, Madonna Alfrieda, hither, but I have recently heard the story of that period minutely from her lips. There was a man whom you encountered in the Euganean hills by the name of Osimo da Feltre."

Had there been at that instant a total darkening of the sun, had the firm earth opened, and the buildings rocked like tempest-swayed boughs, I could not have been more amazed. Never, up to that instant, had Giacomo Deslemaini so much as mentioned Alfrieda to me, though I inferred that he was aware of our feelings toward each other, and assumed that he did not sympathize with the attitude of his brother and sister-in-law. And De Feltre! What could the introduction of his name import?

"We certainly did encounter such a man!" I exclaimed. "I have every reason to remember the fact."

"Well, Messere, Da Feltre is, I believe, at this moment in Ferrara. I met him face to face last night in the Palazzo Deslemaini."

I stared at him incredulously.

"You may think I do not know the man,—that I am dreaming. Many a time have I encountered him when he was here, a member of the court of the Marquis, and it was he who slipped down the palace staircase at midnight as I ascended, for, as it chanced, I took the air late."

"But how did he dare enter the city?" I exclaimed, "and his presence at the Palazzo Deslemaini, what can it mean?"

"Dare! Evidently he dares anything! As to his presence in the palace, that is exactly what I demanded of my brother this morning, and was bidden go bury my nose in my books! Bury my nose indeed! By the living God, but they shall see what I will do! If my brother and his heartless wife are plotting aught against that lovely girl yonder, let them have a care!"

Here was a new man, one whom I did not dream existed. In the space of two minutes he had grown in stature. His brooding eyes were afire with intense emotion.

"I came to tell you that this man was in Ferrara. I have been here twice before and not found you. If you go abroad by night, it were well to look to yourself."

"But Alfrieda!" I cried.

"If harm befall her," he said slowly and impressively, as he took his departure, "I will answer with my own life!"

And how clearly I remembered these words afterward!

Hastily I changed my garb and sought the street again. Dining, as was my wont, at an adjacent eating-house, I hurriedly made my way to the Palazzo D'Este where I was much disgusted to learn that that very morning the Marquis, the Papal Legate, Di Luggio, and several others

high in the councils of the league, had ridden forth for a conference with certain leaders at Bologna, and were likely to be absent all the day following. Engrossed as I had been in my own affairs this excursion had not reached my ears.

"Who has been left in command?" I inquired of my informant.

"The Conte di Cassioli," was the answer.

I groaned inwardly, for the man was a vain martinet from Mantua whom the Marquis and the Legate were courting because of his well-filled pockets. Nevertheless I determined to ascertain if I could get him to take steps toward discovering the whereabouts of Da Feltre, and issuing orders for his apprehension.

I managed to gain admission to his presence, but the result of my earnest appeal to him was quite what I had anticipated it would be. He pompously refused to act. The matter was outside his province, he affirmed. He had heard of the man, was cognizant of some of his acts, but the Marquis was soon to return, and could follow such a policy as he saw fitting. In the meanwhile, if I was not satisfied, I could state the case to the captain of the city guard. I did so with much the same result. The captain, it seemed, had an admiration for Da Feltre, and preferred not to move on his own initiative.

Disgusted, and not a little disturbed, with Berthold as a companion, I haunted the Via Santa Maria della Rosa till considerably after midnight.

Long before I left the street every light had been extinguished in the Palazzo Deslemaini, and for fully an hour ere my departure there had been no passer in the contracted thoroughfare. But I retired to my lodgings reluctantly, discussing with Berthold the advisability of a longer vigil. We finally decided, however, that further watch would be futile.

It was not until the gray dawn had begun to dispel the shadows in the streets of Ferrara that I slept, anxiety riding me like a hag o' the night. When slumber did come it gripped me heavily. It was hard upon ten o'clock when I was aroused by a vigorous pounding without. I leaped from bed and ran toward the entry door.

"Who is there?" I demanded.

"Ercole, Lordship, from Messer Giacomo Deslemaini. I have a letter for you, Lordship!"

I drew the bolts and took the letter.

"Is there an answer?" I inquired.

"Nothing was said, Lordship," and the servant was gone.

It was a bitter chill morning, and I hastily drew on a portion of my clothes before I scanned the parchment. Berthold hearing the disturbance, and the sound of the my voice, had appeared from his room above, and begun to kindle a fire.

"Friend and kinsman," the missive opened, "for as such I have come to regard you, although I am thus to address you for the first and last time."

Amazed, terrified, my eyes devoured the page

which I held, and as I read my blood seemed gradually to congeal in my veins, for thus the dreadful letter proceeded:—

"When I left you yesterday I made you a promise. By the time this reaches you this promise will have been fulfilled. Bear with me, and you shall learn all I know of a deed revolting beyond the bounds of belief,—a deed which those who committed it have now expiated. Returning yesterday from your lodgings, I repaired to my apartment to dress as usual for dinner which I am accustomed to take with my brother and his wife. I do not employ a man-servant, and my dressing-room is the third of three connecting rooms with but one entrance upon the corridor. This will explain to you why I did not realize that the door to my apartments was securely fastened behind me. The barrier is one which I could not break down with any means at my disposal, and I was kept a prisoner until after eight this morning. I was then released from confinement by my brother. He made brief apology for forcibly detaining me, and asked me to descend with him to the breakfast-room where, he said, full explanations would be made. I followed him. At the table I found my sister-in-law. My brother seated himself, and begged me to be seated, but I refused. He appeared to be somewhat surprised at this. I suppose he has so long lorded it over me that he has come to regard me wholly as a nonentity, as I am aware I am looked upon by others. 'I feared, Giacomo,'

he said, 'from what I have observed of late, that you might make objections to what seemed to us—' and he included his wife with a wave of his hand—'the best disposal of our young relative from Padua. We found her absolutely deaf to every proposal made to her as regards her future, firmly fixed in her intention to adhere to her impossible attachment to the person who conducted her hither, hence we resolved to take the matter entirely into our own hands, and act for what was for her best interests as well as ours. Certain advances were made by Messer Ticini, but the arrangement which we have just concluded is vastly more advantageous. Our cousin left at an early hour this morning, in company with Messer Osimo da Feltre and two attendants, to be the bride, at some time later, of Ezzelino da Romano.'

"I think you will believe me, Messer Camposanpiero, when I tell you that at this statement I was incapable of speech. I knew my brother and his wife were both mean and grasping, but that they could be capable of such monstrous behaviour passed the bounds of credibility. But my brother proceeded to lay bare all the baseness of the transaction. 'Not only,' he said, 'will the girl be raised to a position of great honor, but we, the Deslemaini, will now unquestionably be the richest family in Ferrara. Not even the Marquis—'

"But here at last I found a tongue. 'Arnaldo Deslemaini,' I cried, in a frenzy, 'you are no brother of mine! I repudiate you and your unnatural spouse utterly!'

"Messer Camposanpiero, I have long carried a stilleto. I was first impelled to do so after being set upon by foot-pads on one of my nocturnal rambles through the city streets. I have a strength which you would little guess. Need I say more than to reiterate the statement that I have kept my promise to you, and to tell you that when you read this we, the three Deslemaini, will all still be sitting at breakfast."

The parchment fell from my nerveless fingers. I must have uttered some incoherent sound, for Berthold cried out, springing to my aid,

"What has happened, Messer Tiso? what has happened?"

"Hell has come on earth!" I exclaimed, and would have fallen had he not supported me.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FALL OF ANSEDISIO

The despair bordering upon madness of the day that ensued I would not dwell upon. Had it not been for the devoted Berthold and that stanch friend, Fra Salimbene, I should have died by my own hand. Not more closely could a mother have watched her first born, than my faithful ally and servitor watched me during the time directly following that dreadful morning. Then the friar began to plead with me. I would not listen to his reasoning at the outset, being, I think, too overcome, too distracted, to recognize the truth of what he said. But gradually the sanity of his outlook prevailed. Hope commenced to flicker again in my breast, a very pale, feeble flame, later, however, a steady fire that made me ardent to be up and doing.

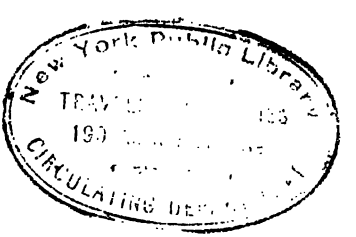
The Marquis Azzo might a dozen times over seize upon the recreant captain of the city guards who had been persuaded to issue for De Feltre a night permit to leave the city; he might cast him into the deepest and darkest of Ferrara dungeons; he might express to me the sincerity of his regret for what had occurred. What was all this in comparison with that which Fra Salimbene held out—Hope!

Ezzelino, he argued, and truly, had already taken the field against the Mantuans. He was

leagues from Padua in hostile territory, intending, with the large force which he had summoned, to overawe his presumptuous rivals. Ansedisio was in command by the Brenta, and behind the walls of Padua. Under the circumstances no nuptials were likely to be celebrated for weeks, nay, it might be for months. In the meanwhile might not the constantly swelling league be victorious over Ansedisio, aye, over Ezzelino himself! Assuredly during this period no harm would befall Alfrieda, for if Ezzelino was so intent upon wedding her, he would see that she was carefully protected.

Extremely sound logic all this, surely, although at first I found it difficult to extract much comfort from it. I ate and drank mechanically. I came and went in a daze. My sleep was broken, with a constantly recurring vision of the three Deslemaini, for they were found, even as Giacomo's letter to me had intimated they would be, sitting stark about the table in the palace breakfast-room.

Finally, however, as I have already indicated, the desire for action grew to be a consuming passion with me. I yearned unspeakably for the hour to arrive when the command should be given for the advance of the leaguer. I drilled the men of my troop assiduously, and had the satisfaction of being complimented upon their maneuvres by the Legate himself. Berthold, I could see, rejoiced over the change in me, and Fra Salimbene never failed when we met, which was frequently, to add fuel to the beacon which he had kindled in my breast.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I was honored by an invitation to be present at the consultation of the leaders to decide upon the day for beginning the campaign. The Marquis of Este presided, appearing a trifle more corpulent than usual in contrast to the Legate, with his spare frame and ascetic countenance. There was the Count of San Bonifacio, ruddy and alert, bearing still in his mind the luring away of his wife, Cunizza, at which Ezzelino had connived; the two brothers, Uberto and Jacopo of Carrara; Fra Giovanni of Scio, representing Bologna; and the Conte Guistiniani who was to command the Venetian contingent. Di Luggio was there, too, and several other officers and churchmen.

There was no prolonged discussion, for it was generally recognized that any further delay would be detrimental to the morale of the troops, many of whom had been in camp a considerable time, and were beginning to chafe under the continued delay. Tuesday of the last week in March was presently settled upon; then it was decided that the Marquis should await at Rovigo the progress of the larger crusading army, and be in readiness to effect a juncture on the receipt of tidings of success. These matters concluded, the Legate invoked God's blessing on the undertaking, and the gathering dispersed.

Every hour of daytime was now full, yet my mind never was far removed from one thought, just as in the night at sea the eye of the pilot is almost constantly fixed upon the star by which he

shapes the course of his ship. The release of my mother and my beloved!—this was the idea that kept its constant dwelling in my brain. Somehow the two women became connected, and the feeling grew within me that if I found one I should find the other. The notion haunted my dreams.

Fra Salimbene had dispatched writings to friends in Padua, the same holy men through whom he had gained his first knowledge of my mother's whereabouts, asking them to ascertain if news was to be had of Alfrieda. The answer which would be erelong forthcoming he promised to forward to me by sure hands. He himself needs must journey southward again, so early on the morning of the day set for the leaguer to move, he appeared to bid me farewell. Berthold was just fastening on my armor, and the friar tarried until this process was completed, when we embraced with fervor.

"Have faith!" he exclaimed, as we descended to the street together. "I am firmly persuaded that all will turn out well, and that the next time I see you it will be in the castle of Fonte, restored to your own, with your loved ones about you."

"If that day ever comes," I answered, "and God grant it may, there is no one who will be more welcome within our doors than yourself. Remember my home, wherever it chance to be, is always yours!"

And so I parted from one who was every inch a man. Forsooth, I know not a nobler soul living!

The stir of departure, the responsibilities and

incidents of the march, the tarry for a brief time in Venice, the crossing of the lagoons and debarkation near the mouth of the Brenta,—all these things made my life one of unceasing activity, but it was an activity which I courted. Now the hardships and the dangers of the campaign grew to be actualities. What had been was as a holiday triumph compared with what was to be.

The country was fair to behold beneath the genial April sun. Wherever we went there were flowers. The air was fragrant with them, and sweet with bird-song. The gonfalons of Venice, the pennons of Ferrara, the banners of Bologna, the ensign of the Pope carried by a youthful standard-bearer whose place was at my side,—these fluttered bravely in the breeze of morning as we advanced against the first fortress to bar our progress, the Castel di Brenta, and it fell, fell quickly, as did Cero and Corregiuola. Ere the last of these successes was gained by our arms, the confident Ansedisio had sallied forth to meet us and offer battle, but he retired to Padua more hastily than he had quitted its walls so great was the number of desertions from his army to ours.

Fearing a direct assault on Padua by means of the armed craft of Venice, he now tried to divert the course of the Brenta into various canals, and was successful. It was this maneuvre more than any other happening that hastened his downfall, for having joined forces with the Marquis of Este who was at this juncture summoned forward

from Rovigo, we marched up the dry river-bed, and one morning when the astonished Podesta awoke we had seized upon the suburbs of the town.

Contest upon contest now ensued. Religious fanatics of every holy order who had attached themselves to our army went among the soldiers arousing them to the point of frenzy. If Ansedisio ordered a sortie, however brave his men, however fiercely they struggled, they were set upon and literally hewn in pieces by our exultant and mania-inspired troops. At times the din was deafening. Every known engine, every invented appliance of war, was brought into play by the attackers and the besieged.

Frequently I detected the presence of Ansedisio himself upon the battlements, and quite as often I caught a glimpse of Osimo da Feltre. Once the latter recognized me while I was directing some operations against one of the gates in a series of outer barriers, and seizing a cross-bow from the grip of a soldier beside him, sent a bolt at me that might have wounded me seriously, if not fatally, had not the ever-watchful Berthold dragged me suddenly from my exposed position.

But our army was not to be denied. After a furious struggle the tower at the gate of Ponte Corbo was demolished. Then it was decided to move upon the gate of Ponte Altinate which was really the key to the entrance into the city. The regiment of exiled Paduans and fighting monks who had worked theselves anew into a blood-

thirsty madness, volunteered to lead the attack. Procuring an enormous battering ram, and devising a wooden pent-house as a shelter from the missiles showered down from above, they advanced amid a pandemonium of cries.

There was not a breath of air that day. The rays of the hot spring sun descended pitilessly, and from the walls upon the roof of the pent-house was poured a stream of ignited pitch and oil. Like a cauldron the contracted space seethed. Awful shrieks arose from those caught in the smoking, blazing mass, while from the battlements mounted shouts and cheers of triumph. But these glorifications were short lived, for soon the wooden portion of the gates took fire. Perceiving this, the monks and the volunteers returned to the onset, feeding the flames with whatever combustibles they could lay hold upon! Vainly those above now endeavored to use water instead of pitch and oil. Unwittingly they had wrought for their own destruction. Again the battering ram was brought into play, and erelong amid a great spluttering and hissing, and amid a blinding belching of flames and smoke, the gates fell inward, and dimly the streets of the city were disclosed. Frantic hands bore rocks, mortar and earth to quench the flaming wreckage; adventurous feet sprang upon it, and despite all efforts at resistance the army of the leaguer like a vast wave swept into Padua.

"Ansedisio! Ansedisio! Capture the Podesta!"

It was I who raised the shout, as I swarmed over

the still steaming barrier by the side of Berthold. My thought was that if hands could be laid upon Ezzelino's nephew the whereabouts of those dear to me could be determined.

My cry was taken up, and wherever the diverging army spread the words were carried. I had seen both Ansedisio and Da Feltre not long before Porta Ponte Altinate gave way frantically exhorting the men upon the walls to renewed exertions. Then suddenly they disappeared, doubtless realizing the futility of further effort. Now where were they? Was another stand to be made behind barricades at some opportune point, or would the entire garrison surrender? A part had already capitulated, but there was a very considerable body of men still to be accounted for.

Even the combined forces of the league, extensive though they were, did not contain a sufficient number to engirdle the city completely, and to one of the northern as well as to one of the western gates for days no heed had been given. If flight was the intention of Ansedisio he would perforce use one of these exits, probably the latter, since from this gate proceeded the most direct road to Vincenza and Verona, and in one of these cities the Podesta would naturally seek refuge.

Hastily selecting twenty-five of the most active men from twice that number who had followed close upon my heels, and placing myself at their head, with Berthold, now wholly recovered from his lameness, as an aid, I plunged into a series of

byways and alleys with the intention of making a short cut for the Porta San Giovanni. It was here, if at all, that Ansedisio was to be intercepted. Only once did we encounter soldiers, and then in numbers inferior to ours, so that they rapidly gave way before us. Indeed the fighting spirit of the garrison appeared to have evaporated like the dews of morning.

Dashing at length into the Via San Giovanni, I beheld the gateway wide, and not a soul visible. But when I climbed to the guard-house tower, I descried, in the distance, a group of horsemen spurring swiftly into the west.

"Too late! too late!" I muttered, in sore disappointment, "'tis Ansedisio without doubt!"

It was he indeed, and could he have foreseen to what an agonized death he was riding with all the speed of the fleetest steed in Padua, how quickly would he have wheeled and thrown himself into the arms of his enemies, for they at least would have been merciful, and mercy toward one who had failed, or opposed or thwarted him, Ezzelino da Romano never knew!

CHAPTER XXII

THE FATE OF OSIMO THE DWARF

Disconsolately I descended the steps of the guard-house tower, and rejoined in depressed silence the troopers who had followed me, now grouped about the door with Berthold, awaiting my commands.

"He has escaped," I remarked dispiritedly, addressing my good friend and servitor. "It were useless to follow."

"And Da Feltre?" queried the Suabian.

"Is doubtless with him. I could detect as many as half a dozen riders in the swirling dust-cloud."

Before Berthold had time to question or comment further there was the sound of swift hoof-beats in the Via San Agostino which, not far from the Porta San Giovanni, debouches into the via of that name.

"Close the gates! close the gates!" I cried, and while several soldiers leaped to execute my order, madly around the corner urged half a score of horsemen. From the confident manner in which they rode it was evident that they had anticipated finding no bar to their flight. Those in advance checked their animals, but one more daring than the others in spirit pushed his way to the front with a volley of violent imprecations. The man was Da Feltre. In a breathing space his glance

took in the situation. His countenance blazed with ferocious hatred.

"We can cut them down, and win from the city, if you will strike stoutly!" he shouted to the men behind him. "Will you hazard it?"

"Aye!" they answered him, as in one voice. "Lead on! We are with you!"

It was a last desperate chance, and they realized it.

"Charge, then!" shrieked De Feltre, and with that they made at us.

We outnumbered them two to one, but they were mounted, well mounted, and it was by no means an unequal combat. From the first it was a cut and slash, a hack and hew, business. Above the clash of meeting weapons and the oaths of the combatants would occasionally rise the shrill scream of a wounded horse. This way and that in the contracted space surged the fierce contest. Vainly Da Feltre endeavored to reach me. Berthold was ever watchful, and beat off his most furious onslaughts. Indeed it was the prowess of the Suabian that presently gave us the advantage. Two, and then three, of the mounted bravos were dragged from their saddles by him and dispatched, but not Da Feltre. If Berthold was our mainstay, the dwarf was certainly the animating force of the Paduan men-at-arms.

At length the superiority of our members began to tell. Only four men were now aiding Da Feltre, and that subtle warrior perceived that capture was

imminent. In truth it was at his seizure that I was especially aiming.

Suddenly, just as Berthold made a futile grasp at his bridle and I pressed him upon his exposed side,—he was partially screened by one of his comrades,—he roared out orders to give over the struggle, roweled his steed madly, and plunged frantically toward the Via San Agostino, while his comrades scattered in other directions. There was a riderless horse near by, a well-mettled animal, from which one of the Paduans had been unseated. Gripping the creature by the mane, I vaulted into the saddle, caught the dragging bridle-rein, and urged hotly upon the heels of Da Feltre, shouting over my shoulder to my followers to hasten after.

Although the dwarf had a flying start, I felt confident of overtaking him erelong, for I descried that his mount was wounded in the flank, while mine was uninjured. Only two frenzied men would have dared the wanton pace at which we flew over the uneven pavements. In Da Feltre's heart burned the determination not to be taken, cost what it might; in mine flamed the equally strong resolve to capture the arch villain, for I believed that from his lips I could learn what I yearned to know, and force him to speak I would if once I had him within my power. In such a case as his I should have small scruple in regard to method. I could readily forgive myself for employing one of those persuasive instruments known to exist so plentifully in Ezzelino's dungeons.

When we first entered the Via San Agostino there was not a footfarer in view. The houses appeared to be shuttered tight, and the doors barred. As we thundered through the street, however, a great uproar being raised by my troopers hurrying on in the rear, I was conscious of the cautious opening of casements, and of the scrutiny of amazed eyes. It was a portion of the city into which the riot of conflict now for the first time penetrated.

Step by step I realized that I was gaining, and with what a sense of exultation I gripped my sword, and shook my rein free! Then from the Via Saracinesca, which we were approaching, emerged a mounted band, the Papal Legate at their head. A shout of triumph rose to my lips, but the dwarf checked his steed in time, and swerved into the passage leading to the Piazza Del Castello, a desperate move, but the only course left for him to follow, save surrender. In altering the direction of his flight he had permitted me to gain still further upon him, and now the head of my horse was at the flank of his. Another stride and another, and I leaned forward to deliver a blow with the flat of my blade that should stun my enemy. As though he divined my purpose, he reined quickly toward the wall, by a violent jerk pulled his horse back upon its haunches, and slipped from the saddle. I shot forward, and before I could recover myself, and follow his example, he had sprung across the narrow thoroughfare, flung

himself against a door which yielded to the pressure of his body, and then closed, as though by some magic agency, behind him.

Ominous, massive, and tall loomed the structure which had so suddenly and mysteriously swallowed the nimble Da Feltre, the town hold of one of Ezzelino's most ardent supporters, the House of the Ridotti. It was practically a castle, and, properly defended, might stand a considerable siege. But was it likely that so wily a man as the dwarf would long immure himself in a refuge where, although present safety was sure, ultimate capture was quite as certain? Nay, not he!

So when I had dismounted, instead of tarrying and endeavoring to effect an entrance at the main portal of the palace which the Legate and those accompanying him were already drawing near, I darted into an alley which gave access to the rear of the huge structure. Here I was quite confident I should speedily see the dwarf make his appearance. I chose for my point of vantage a dark and deep doorway less than half a score of paces from the tall gate in the high blank wall that surrounded the narrow yard or enclosure flanking the Palazzo dei Ridotti. In the middle of the gate was a small wicket upon which I kept my eyes fixedly riveted.

I had not long to wait. My attentive ears detected a slight click, the wicket swung slowly inward, and in the dim space the face of the dwarf was framed,—the countenance of an incarnate

devil. Whatever swarthy attractiveness I had once been forced to admit it possessed had vanished. In the features were now visible all the wicked passions which worked in the soul of the man. I caught the satanic gleam of his eyes as they swept this way and that, and finally rested upon the spot where I was crouching.

Could the dwarf discern me? I doubted it, yet so long did he gaze, and with such intentness, that at length I began to believe he detected something that aroused his suspicions. Then what Alfrieda said in regard to his powers of seeing in the dark flashed upon me. Yet only a small portion of my person was in the line of his angle of vision, none at all of the upper part of my body, for that was protected from view by two large loosened and projecting stones through the mortarless crevice between which I was peering.

He continued to regard my corner of concealment, however, until with a swift snap he shut the wicket. Something told me that he suspected danger in the alley. What would now be his plan, I wondered. Was there still another means of egress? I was inclined to fancy not, yet this was but a blind guess. Dusk was threatening, so I determined at once to test the defences of those who were occupying the Palazzo dei Ridotti. By whom the place was held, and in what number, I hoped soon to discover.

Slipping from the doorway that had sheltered me, I dashed to the corner of the alley by which I

had gained the rear of the palace, and began calling upon Berthold and also upon certain others of my troop who had been in attendance upon me. I assumed that by this time they would have traced me as far as the House of the Ridotti, nor was I mistaken. Scarcely had I shouted twice ere the countenance of the worthy Suabian dawned upon my view. I beckoned to him vehemently. He did not wait for me to address him, but cried out as he drew near:

"There are those in the street without who declared that you had followed the rascally dwarf within, Messer Tiso, and some of the men, under my direction, are now battering down the door."

"Good!" said I. "Do you urge them on. I believe we have him cornered at last. But there is a door here also to be broken in, and I need half a dozen sturdy fellows to aid me. What are you using for a battering ram?"

"We found some scantling in the Piazza del Castello. I will dispatch a couple of the men for a second piece."

"Precisely the thing, but it should be rather short, for the space here, as you see, is contracted."

Berthold left me to my vigil, but I was solitary only for a brief time. Soon six stout troopers came charging up the alley bearing the improvised ram. The beam was poised, and after half a dozen telling blows had been delivered the tall gate pitched inward. The inclosure thus revealed was wholly bare. Confronting us were the heavily

barred narrow windows of the lower floor of the palace, and a door which I saw would for a long period defy our every effort to rive it from its fastenings. Of defenders there was no sign.

Thud!—Thud!—Faintly from the street on which the House of the Ridotti faced came the sound of battering blows, and now we added our contribution to the noise, driving with all our force the heavy scantling against the barrier that confronted us. It was during the second interval of rest from this exertion that my attention was attracted by the falling of what appeared to be a small bit of mortar from somewhere above. The object struck the crest of the area wall, and dropped upon the farther side. I raised my eyes carelessly. Aloft some forty feet a projection that resembled a flying buttress protruded from the palace wall, and all but touched the roof of a mean structure beyond the alley. It was a fragment of the Roman building which had been incorporated in the palace at the time of its construction, probably a portion of an arch. Its crest had the appearance of being top-heavy, bearing a wide, but partially crumbled, entablature.

As I looked another detached scrap descended, and then, with a suppressed ejaculation of amazement, I discerned the foot and lower leg of a man suddenly thrust into view. The owner of foot and limb had worked himself along the precarious pathway, the remains of the arch being accessible from one of the upper windows of the palace, and was

now drawing himself up preparatory to making a spring for the adjacent roof now almost within reach.

I felt that the man was Da Feltre before his head and shoulders became visible, and was filled with such a rage that he appeared to be escaping me that I gave an impotent cry, and looked vainly about for some object to hurl at him, something that would cause him to miss his foothold as he poised to leap.

Da Feltre indeed it was. As he raised himself he heard my exclamation, knew himself discovered, and made a brief, scornful gesture of defiance. His chief attention, however, was devoted to his venture, a venture which, if successful, gave him an excellent opportunity of eluding all pursuit, for the roof upon which he would land offered easy access to half a score or more others, from any one of which he might descend long before his pursuers could get upon his track.

For an instant he stood erect, a sinister figure against the reddening western sky, his inferior height, his long arms, his tense pose, lending a grotesque effect to the picture. He retreated a single pace, then bounded forward, but before he projected himself into the air the extremity of the hanging segment of the ancient arch crumbled beneath him, and instead of landing as he had intended, his body was hurled against the wall just below the roof he had aimed to reach. I saw his hands go out in a blind attempt to clutch the cop-

ing, then he fell—fell backward amid a mass of debris.

We found him in the alley, mangled but still breathing. Presently he moaned, and slowly lifted his fluttering lids. As his glance caught mine, there was a gleam of recognition, and his expression grew malevolent.

"Mother of God!" he cried feebly, and I realized that the words were costing him a mighty effort, "to die in this wretched fashion! I was on the verge of escape, too, for you never would have taken me had I gained yonder roof, curse you! I meant one day later to kill you, my fine Messer Tiso Camposanpiero, after the great and good Ezzelino had tired of the sweet Madonna Alfrieda, and turned her over to me."

His smile was diabolical, and while I recognized in his words only the most bitter hatred,—a desire to wound me to the quick by vile insinuations,—I found sufficient grace within my heart to say to him,—

"Can you not let your last deed on earth be a kindly one, Messer da Feltre? Why should you go on man's long dark journey with evil upon your lips? Even after all that has passed, if you will tell me where I may find Madonna Alfrieda, I will freely forgive you."

By a last spasmodic jerk he raised his head. A baleful light shone in his eyes for an instant, flickered, and went out.

"You will never find her," he contrived to whisper, "you will never——"

And so perished a fit disciple of the master whom he served.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PRISONS GAPE

I bivouaced with the men of my command that night in the Piazza of the Signori, leaving the occupants of the Palazzo dei Ridotti who had attempted to befriend Da Feltre, to whatever fate chance might bring them. The city was wholly in the grip of the leaguer, but with another dawn a new problem confronted the leaders,—insubordination among the troops.

Certain portions of the allied army had been recruited from the scum of the population,—from the street-brawlers of Bologna, from the rabble of Ferrara, from the water-rascals of Venice. These men had enlisted purely from the hope of rich loot in whatever territories or towns might be captured, and now that Padua was undisputedly in our possession, large bands of them set forth upon a round of indiscriminate pillage. For a time it seemed as though the innocent Paduans were likely to fare worse at the hands of their deliverers than at those of the tyrant who had oppressed them so long and grievously. At length, however, although not until after several severe and sanguinary encounters, disorder was quelled, and by the noon of the second day following that which marked the fall of the gate of Ponte Altinate, peace reigned in every street of the captured city.

I was returning to the Piazza of the Signori,

after having made to the Legate a report of my share in the reduction of the revolt, when I was aware of one of my men hastening toward me.

"There is a Franciscan monk yonder most anxious to see your lordship," he exclaimed, as he approached.

Could it be Fra Salimbene? That was hardly possible. It was a mesenger from him perhaps. Daily of late I had looked for some word of those who, even in the heat of the conflict, had rarely been absent from my mind, some word that would buoy my courage, yet none had come. But now—

I hurried forward expectantly, and soon descried a friar in conversation with Berthold. A glance informed me that it was not Fra Salimbene.

My Suabian friend spied me drawing near, and pointed me out.

"Welcome, father!" I cried, extending my hand to the noble-faced man who turned to greet me. "Something tells me that you bear news."

"Aye, Messer Camposanpiero," answered the friar heartily, "and my brother Salimbene bade me inform you ere you broke the seal that it is, in the main, good news."

He therewith handed me a parchment.

"In thanking you, father," I said reverently, "I am thanking God first of all."

"It is just that you should, Messere, for his many mercies!"

"Be cheered, my good friend," the letter ran, "she lives, and is reported to be well, but whether

she is detained in palace or in prison my informant could not ascertain.—Salimbene."

"And I am free to seek her!" I exclaimed exultantly, glancing up and meeting the gaze of my friend's messenger. "Heaven grant, father, that I may one day bring to another as great a boon of happiness as you have this day brought to me!"

"May your wish be realized, Messere!"

"Is there any possible way in which I can serve you? If there is, I beg that you will command me!"

"There is none, and let me not delay you, for I surmise what you desire to do. I am now for the House of the Franciscans."

We clasped hands again, and he departed. Hardly had he disappeared in the mouth of a winding thoroughfare when Di Luggio rode up.

"It is the wish of the Legate and the Marquis Azzo that you superintend the opening of the prisons, Camposanpiero," he announced, without dismounting. "It seems to them fitting that this matter should be entrusted to your hands rather than to those of any other. Where jailers and keys are lacking you will understand that you are to use force."

He saluted, wheeled, and rode away.

The prisons! The power of search! The privilege of freeing the prisoners!—the very thing I had most longed for under my supervision! It was in one of the prisons I should find my beloved ones, for had I not already visited, in my efforts to aid

in subduing our insubordinate soldiery, the two palaces in one of which Alfrieda would have been confined had she been detained within palace walls, —the Palazzo Deslemaini and the home of Ezzelino! The former had evidently not been occupied since the fall of the family, the latter had been rifled by the insurgent army rabble.

The Zelie first, then!—that gloomy and threatening pile which took its name from the talented and ill-starred architect who designed it, the poor wretch who, falling under Ezzelino's displeasure, was the earliest victim to perish within its dungeons. Here it was that Fra Salimbene had learned my mother was incarcerated at the time of our leaving Padua.

A terse command to Berthold, and with my zealous aid and a squad of troopers at my back, I started at quick step through the streets.

An underling of the tyrant's who had been chief in authority at the Zelie had barricaded the outer prison doors, and intrenched himself behind them, under the impression that the tide would turn, and Ezzelino's partisans regain the advantage which they had lost. He realized better than the Vicar's nephew what might be the full range of his patron's rage against an incompetent and unfaithful servant.

The man at length consented to parley with me, however, and it took me but a brief space to convince him that to yield was the only course. Feeling that I was armed with discretionary powers, I

told him that he could quit Padua, if he choose, whereupon the doors of the prison were speedily thrown open and the keys delivered into my hands.

With mingled sensations of exultation and trepidation I issued my commands, assigning to Berthold and certain trusty others the charge of opening the cells, preserving order, and guiding the miserable unfortunates to the outer air.

Would my beloved ones be among those liberated? I longed myself to be the one who should fling back the door that held them in bondage, but it was my place, as officer in command, to be occupying the position of authority at the prison entrance.

With what eagerness, what anxiety, what yearning, I scanned the faces of those who passed me in long procession, a most lamentable multitude! Although unknown to the majority of the prisoners, many recognized in me the power that had wrought their deliverance. By some I was blessed, by others I was cursed that I had not come sooner. Strong men were moved to tears, and weak women to loud cries of exultation. There were those who went raving mad on beholding the sky. And then the children!—but let me not dwell upon so pitiful, so heart-rending a scene!

The last of many hundreds had disappeared, and the ache within my bosom was not soothed. My mother and Alfrieda were not found. All attempt at keeping a record of those confined, executed, or released had been long since abandoned.

I had naught to guide me in my search. Again and yet again the experience I had just endured was repeated in all its harrowing details, and before the entrance to the last of the prisons of Padua I stood, a sorrow-smitten man. Had the worst, then, befallen? Was the flame of hope which I had so fondly tended through all the bygone arduous and weary weeks to prove no more than a delusive marish-fire?

Alfrieda's mother had been released and succored, and some of my kindred, but not those whom I so lovingly sought.

I gazed into Berthold's eyes, and read there his unspoken sympathy. Even while I looked his expression changed. The gleam as of a swift-born inspiration flashed across his countenance.

"Messer Capitano," said he, saluting, for we were not alone, "there is still the great prison of Malta at Cittadella!"

Hope leaped high again, and became the fair pharos which I had so long kept alight. I flung a glance at the heavens. There rode the sun more than two hours high.

"We will summon an hundred horsemen," I exclaimed, "and crave permission for the act afterward. We can make Cittadella, which is known to be disaffected, before dusk. If we bear news of Padua's fall, Cittadella will fall too!"

Berthold entered into the project with keen enthusiasm. Horses were procured, and men speedily enlisted, for the soldiers of my command were ripe

for any undertaking. Leaving all heavy trappings behind, we spurred northward through the gate of Codalunga. It was an hour for action, and not for speech, and there was no exchange of words. About us on every side the lush loveliness of spring clothed the land. The waters of the Brenta reflected the warm glow of the westering sun, and the stream seemed like a writhing serpent of gold. As far as the eye could sweep over all that fertile demesne there was no sign of a human being. Tyranny and war had set their cruel grip upon the soil-tillers and immured them within the walls of cities.

From the moment of starting not a single glance did I cast behind. "Forward! forward!" this was the sound to which my pulses throbbed. "Forward!" this was what the hoofs of the horses said, soft upon the turf, harsh upon the flint of the path we trod.

Lower and lower dipped the sun. The pace began to tell upon some of the animals. At first we had pressed on in a compact body, now we were spread out in loose order over the plain. I kept constantly in the lead, my steed apparently animated with my burning impulse.

We were, perhaps, within a mile of Cittadella when I descried what had the seeming of a dark speck in the distance. Presently it grew to be an extended, wavering line. The meaning of this line flashed upon me. The news of Padua's fall had preceded us. Cittadella had risen, battered down

the prison gates and doors, freed the prisoners, and they were marching forth.

My presumption was in all respects correct. On they plodded, those most miserable of mortals, going they cared not whither so long as they turned their backs upon the spot where they had endured such unspeakable sufferings. Men and women were there, among the noblest in the land,—and children, too, pity-moving beyond words, like those that emerged from the Zelie.

I faced about and halted my men, dividing them into two ranks equal in number that they might thus line the way.

"Bare your heads," I cried, "in token of honor and sympathy for the unfortunate!"

Gravely the troopers did as I bade them.

But the newly liberated, fancying they beheld in us fresh persecuters, paused and huddled together like so many panic-seized sheep.

I dismounted, and moved toward them, holding up my hand in sign of friendliness.

"We have ridden," I called out, "to your aid,—not to injure, but to protect you!"

I, too, had bared my head, and as I approached that wretched group about which the beams of the sunset threw an aura that was like the glory of martyrdom, there rose a cry that was poignant in its intensity, a sound that thrilled and filled my very soul. And then two women separated themselves from the cowering others, two women who the next instant were clasped close to my breast in rapture,—my mother and Alfrieda.

CHAPTER XXIV

EXIT THE VICAR

Hand in hand with Alfrieda, radiant and restored after her dreadful experience in the prison of Malta, I walked in the rose-bower of the castle of Fonte one morning at the edge of the grape harvest,—Alfrieda, now my wife.

"How fares the mother this morning?" I was asking her.

"She avers that she has her whole strength again," Alfrieda answered, "and certainly her vigor is astonishing."

"She would not be with us, she declares, were it not for you, my love. Was it not strange that fate should have cast you together in prison?"

"It was something more than fate, my Tiso!"

"I believe it was indeed. It was the providence of God!"

Borne to Padua by Osimo da Feltre at Ezzelino's command, Alfrieda had thence been hastened to the Cittadella prison. Whether the bloody Vicar had changed his mind in regard to espousing her was never revealed. About the same time my mother, for some unknown cause, was transferred from the Zelie to the terrible Malta, and an unwitting gaoler had confined the two in one cell. The feeling of admiration that each had entertained for the other, despite their slight acquaintance, now ripened

speedily into love when Alfrieda's secret was told, the close affection of mother and daughter. Alfrieda's ministrations had been the means of preserving my mother's life not only during the agonizing days of their common incarceration, but also afterward when the reaction from the frightful experiences which she had undergone had for months prostrated her.

With the pacification of Paduan territory I had quitted the ranks of war, devoting myself to restoring to health and happiness the two who made the world for me. In the lands of the Brescians and Cremonese the ruthless Ezzelino still raged, and I foresaw that the day would come when I should again bear arms against him. Even as I walked with Alfrieda in the pleasaunce of roses, and basked in the fair sunlight of her smiles, it had already dawned, though I guessed it not.

"Ahem! Ahem!" sounded a gruff voice somewhere behind a rosebush.

It was Berthold.

"Come forth, Messer Capitano!" cried I (he was now captain of all the men-at-arms who wore the crest of the Camposanpieresi). "Be not timid! There is no dark danger stalking hereabouts."

"Of that fact I am aware, Lordship," bowed he, with exaggerated courtesy, as he appeared suddenly, his rugged face beaming. "I have here, however, a missive for you just brought by a horseman whose steed reeks with haste. He awaits an answer," and Berthold gave me the writing.

I opened it, and read thus:—

"In Camp beside the Adda. To my esteemed friend, Tiso di Camposanpiero: Greeting—If you would be in at the death of the were-wolf who has, I believe, been driven to his last lair, take horse and ride swiftly with him who bears this missive. You will be warmly welcomed by

Buosa da Doara."

It was the identical Buosa da Doara whom I had impersonated that memorable night in Ezzelino's palace. Encountering him after Padua's fall, when the Vicar had played double with him and the Marquis Pelavicini, I had made clear to him the causes for my conduct on the occasion of my treating him with such scant courtesy, had craved and received his pardon, had entertained him and his suite at Fonte, and won his esteem and regard. He was now fulfilling a promise made when I last had speech with him,—a promise that he would inform me when, in his estimation, the hour arrived for compassing Ezzelino's downfall.

"I have other more pressing duties now," I had said to him, "but when the crucial time appears to be drawing near, inform me, and, if I may, I will fight with you."

I handed Da Doara's message to Alfrieda.

"I think it is the end," I said.

Here eyes rapidly scanned the page.

"Gird on your sword, my husband!" she exclaimed, straightening herself to her full height, "and use it not for the sake of revenge, but for the cause of humanity!"

"It shall be even as you say, my love," I answered, and she and my mother were in the courtyard to bid me God-speed when, with Berthold and a dozen hardy retainers, led by Da Doara's messenger, I rode forth a little later from the very gate through which Ezzelino had stormed with his treacherous following that memorable autumn day so many years before.

By sunlight and by starlight we fared unflaggingly, pausing only to bait or change our steeds, until in the golden haze of a humid dawn we reached the camp by a ford of the drought-shrunken Adda. Here Da Doara and his allies were awaiting the next move on the part of the hemmed and harried Vicar. Baiting him upon one side were the Cremonese; pressing him upon another were the Mantuans; crowding him upon a third were the forces of Milan under the brilliant Martino della Torre; while about him like a cloud, ready to envelop him at any moment, hung the light cavalry of Ferrara.

But the indomitable one was undismayed. In days long gone an astrologer had warned him against "Assano." Of this danger, too, his mother had prophesied. For this reason he had for years avoided the primal seat of his power,—Bassano. And now he was suffering from a wound received at the Cassano bridge. This would have daunted many men, but it did not move him. He was like a resting tiger watching for a favorable moment to make another spring.

Through the haze finally burst the sun, red and ominous. I was conversing with Da Doara, standing in front of his tent, when word was brought in that Ezzelino had crossed the Adda at a spot considerably above where the camp of the leaders was pitched. Instantly it was to horse again. I was given a place near the friend who had summoned me, while Berthold and my retainers were assigned to one of his mounted companies. From the north resounded fierce shouts and the clash of steel, telling that the battle was already on.

It was toward Bergamo that the daring and desperate Lord of Romano was endeavoring to hew his way. Troops were hastily sent forward to strengthen those who were receiving the brunt of the attack, and then the girdle about the weakened army of the tyrant was gradually tightened. Erelong it became apparent that there was absolutely no avenue of escape for the beleaguered Vicar.

We spurred up behind a strong detachment of Cremona pikemen who seemed to be giving way before the onset of the opposing cavalry.

"Hold your ground, men!" shouted Da Doara. "Support is at hand!"

"There is no need of aid, Lordship," replied an officer. "We are yielding only that these Brescians may have a chance to quit the field. They are abandoning Ezzelino."

The officer's statement proved to be fully true, and presently, through an opening in the lines,

the entire mounted contingent of Brescians galloped homeward. Upon the Vicar's remaining troops the combined forces now fell with furious energy. Despite his injuries, the unyielding Ezzelino performed prodigious feats of valor. Here, there, everywhere, he cut, slashed, and hacked in his mad efforts to open a way to freedom. But the press about him grew constantly denser. Into this welter of horsemen and footmen with those about me I at length clove a path. To the very last the raging tyrant fought, bleeding from trunk and limb. After his sword had been smitten from his grasp he would have been rent in pieces by the infuriated soldiery had not Da Doara and I literally torn him from them, and borne him from the field to Pelavicini's tent.

Later, when the leeches had finished their ministrations, I went in with Da Doara and looked upon him, but not a word did he vouchsafe to either one of us, only gazed at us with malign, inscrutable eyes, and this was the attitude which he adopted toward all.

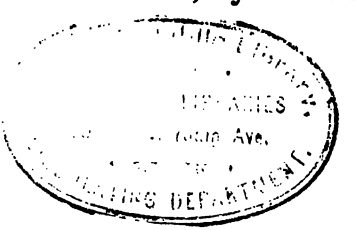
Swathed in bandages, for he had at least a dozen wounds, he was borne to Soncino, and there, in the great hall of the municipality, this fallen tyrant, he who had made a mock of the misfortunes and agonies of others, became himself a public spetcacle, a thing at which the basest scullion might sneer unscathed.

Food he refused, the consolation of the church he spurned, and, regarding him on the morning of

the day which was his last on earth, crouching against the pillar to which he was chained in the center of his place of confinement, despite all the injury which he had wrought to me and mine, I could find in my heart little feeling save that of pity.

On the eleventh day after the battle of the Adda, in a sudden frenzy he contrived to tear the bandages from his wounds, and so expired. And though they buried his body in the church of San Francisco at Soncino amid the odor of incense, the chanting of requiems, and the genuflections of holy men, I can but believe that his soul went to its own place which could be none other than the blackness of some outer void far, far from the shining courts of God.

From that dire and tragic experience, with what relief, what gratitude, what joy, I turned my face toward a scene of contentment and peace, toward a garden where, amid the roses, love awaited me,—toward Fonte which was to be henceforward, while life should last, my heart's home!



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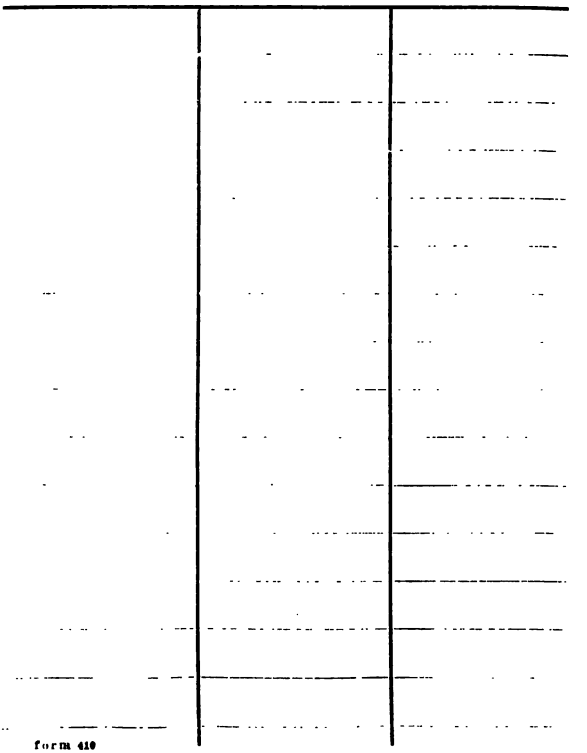

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